

Post-secondary education

Mr. Stephen Blais: My question is for the Premier.

Madam Speaker, Ontario should be leading North America in innovation, talent and opportunity. But under this Premier's watch, we've fallen embarrassingly behind. We are dead last in Canada for per-student university funding. While places like Quebec, California and Massachusetts are powering ahead, investing 3%, 4%, even 6% of their GDP into research and development, Ontario can't even crack 2%. We're getting lapped by global innovation leaders, and instead of investing in brainpower, the Premier is stuck in traffic with yesterday's priorities.

Why is the Premier's government steering Ontario into the slow lane when we should be in a full-speed race towards a smarter and stronger future?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Minister of Colleges and Universities.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I'll remind the member opposite: Under their government, it was the highest tuition in Canada. We will not put that on the backs of our students, Speaker.

On top of the \$5 billion we provide the sector every year, we've invested another \$2 billion in the last 15 months. We're making targeted investments into labour market needs, whether that's the \$75 million to our colleges for construction seats, the \$55 million for new teaching seats—with half of those being French teaching seats—as well as the \$10 million for First Nations scholarships.

We're focusing on what the economy needs. This summer, we'll be starting a review of the funding model, and we'll ensure that our post-secondary system is continuing to be world-class, as it always has been.

Mr. Stephen Blais: That doesn't change the fact that this province is behind Massachusetts, it's behind California, it's behind Washington in investing in research and development. The Premier talks a big game about jobs and growth, but the truth is, you can't build a strong economy when you're cutting off the brainpower at its source. Colleges and universities aren't asking for extravagances; they're asking for a little bit of oxygen. Instead, they're being told to do more with less while our competitors invest in their future. We're now seeing the cost of that: Programs are being cut, fewer seats at universities and fewer reasons for talent to stay in Ontario.

To the Premier: How can we expect to lead in innovation when his government treats education like a line item to be cut instead of a launchpad to power our future?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Let me be very clear, Speaker: Funding for the post-secondary system is higher than it's ever been in Ontario's history. Some \$1.3 billion last year was invested into the system to stabilize it because the federal Liberals unilaterally changed the international student market, on top of the \$750 million we've now invested into STEM seats, graduating an extra 20,000 STEM graduates every year on top of the 70,000 graduates in STEM we're already providing the economy.

I've already mentioned the investments, but I'll mention it again to the member opposite: \$75 million for construction seats, with 100 of those being planning seats for our municipalities—understanding there's a need for planning—on top of the \$55 million for 2,600 new teaching seats, as well as the \$10 million for First Nations grants for the north.

We're going to continue standing by this sector and meeting with the sector to ensure that our system will continue to be there for the students of Ontario.

Education funding

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Our children deserve the best-quality education, but under this government, they are in large classes without qualified teachers, without access to mental health care, in crumbling schools that don't have enough paper, pencils or textbooks.

Since this government came to power, they have taken \$6.35 billion from our education system. This year, again, while our education system is struggling to meet our kids' needs, they are widening the funding gap instead of closing it. How bad do things have to get before the Premier will finally restore the education funding he has cut?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, I'll just say this: The cut that the member referenced is certainly news to me, and I would certainly welcome her tabling the document that shows year-over-year cuts in the education budget, because—again, Madam Speaker, if those cuts happened the way the member says, I'm certainly unaware of that. But I'd appreciate those documents that highlight that, because I know that the time that we have been here, we've increased funding.

In fact, this budget, which it seems the opposition will be voting against, includes historic funding in education—the highest level ever in the province's history. But make no mistake about it, Madam Speaker, I do understand that more continuously needs to be done to make sure that our students are prepared for the jobs of tomorrow.

That is why we have told school boards across the province of Ontario: Refocus your efforts on making sure that the money that we send goes to the classroom to give our students, teachers and parents the confidence that they will have the best students ready for the jobs of tomorrow.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Ottawa West—Nepean.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: It's not a great sign for our education system, Speaker, when the Minister of Education is unaware of what education funding has been under his government.

But the minister keeps telling school boards they have to cut deficits while ignoring the fact that he's responsible for those deficits, and nowhere is that more true than for special education. Nearly every school board in the province is spending more on special education than what they are getting from this government, and that's for a system that is badly failing our children with disabilities. The government's funding doesn't even come close to eliminating that deficit, let alone provide the additional resources we need to protect these kids and give them the education they deserve.

Why is it always the most vulnerable kids who pay the biggest price for this government's cuts?

Hon. Paul Calandra: It is always easy for opposition members to throw out all kinds of numbers and say this and that. I challenge the member opposite: If the member has documentation that shows that this government has reduced funding for education between 2018 and now, I ask the member to prove me wrong. Table those documents. Table each budget from every single year from 2018. I encourage the member to prove me wrong, or else do not get up in this House and suggest that we have made cuts that simply have not happened.

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What we do do, Madam Speaker, is we put money to our school boards. I agree with the member opposite: If school boards aren't funding the programs the way they should be, we will step in and we will make sure that they are being funded, whether it's special education, whether it's student transportation, whether it's school boards that, as opposed to fixing their schools, leave money in accounts so that schools aren't being repaired, we will step in. We will do the job. We'll put an end to politics in the classroom. We'll play politics here, but we'll fund the system and give our students the tools they need to—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Question.

Notice of dissatisfaction

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Pursuant to standing order 36(a), the member for Ottawa West–Nepean has given notice of her dissatisfaction with the answer to her question given by the Minister of Education regarding education funding. This matter will be debated today following private members' public business.