

Government accountability

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I rise to call out the troubling misuse of public dollars by this government and their endorsement of employers who mistreat their workers. Through the Skills Development Fund, this government has given almost \$10 million to a low-scoring numbered company. The so-called Social Equality and Inclusion Centre, or SEI, has an Instagram account with one single post from 2023 and a website that hasn't been updated since its 2021 launch.

Jenny Andonov, the sole director of SEI and a PC donor, told the Trillium that she partnered with companies owned by her then boss, Zlatko Starkovski, who also happens to be a long-time Ford supporter, at the nightclub Muzik. Mr. Starkovski now owns and runs Grand Bizarre, Toronto Event Centre and FYE Ultra Club at the CNE. He controls every asset at the horticultural building. All his businesses are stacked on top of each other, paying each other rent, sharing employees, vendors and payroll resources. This circular economy makes Ms. Andonov's claim that no SDF funding was reaching the FYE Ultra Club unbelievable.

Mr. Starkovski's new burlesque club now operates under a strip club licence. Servers are scantily dressed or topless, and lap dances are offered in \$400 private rooms. They've been actively recruiting from other strip bars. They've encouraged pretty servers to become strippers and strippers to become aerialists, and they've actually forced their employees to sign non-disclosure agreements.

Did the government have money that goes to a strip club—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Members' statements?

Victoria Mboko

Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos: It is truly a pleasure to rise today to recognize Victoria Mboko, an exceptional young woman from Burlington. Recently, I was able to join the mayor of Burlington and my colleague the MPP for Burlington at a special event in which Victoria was presented the key to the city of her hometown.

At just 19, Victoria is ranked the number-one singles player in Canada and currently sits at number 18 in the Women's Tennis Association. Earlier this year, she won 22 successive matches on the World Tennis Tour without dropping a set to claim four International Tennis Federation singles titles.

Victoria is not only an extraordinary athlete but a role model whose achievements inspire young people across my community of Oakville North–Burlington and beyond to pursue their own dreams in sport, academics and any path they choose. Sport plays a powerful role in shaping young leaders. It teaches teamwork, perseverance and the courage to meet challenges head on.

Our government is proud to support women and sport and invest in community-based programs which encourage girls to participate in sport and lead healthier lives. Victoria serves to highlight just what girls and women can achieve.

Victoria, your community is so proud of you as you continue to realize your dreams.

Housing

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: As temperatures drop below zero, my office has seen a marked increase in constituents requesting help due to housing instability. We are receiving calls from families with young children, seniors and individuals with disabilities—all suddenly without safe or adequate housing.

Shelters in our city remain at capacity. People are sleeping in their vehicles, in hospital waiting rooms or outside in dangerous weather conditions. Social housing wait-lists are stretching years into the future, and many feel they are without options. Meanwhile, the government is advancing legislation such as Bill 60—legislation that weakens long-standing tenant protections.

When so many Ontarians are hanging on by a thread, these policy changes can have devastating consequences, pushing people into housing precarity or homelessness. Since taking office, this government has cut spending on community housing by 70%. More than 80,000 Ontarians experienced homelessness last year. That's a staggering 25% increase in two years. These are not just statistics; they are our neighbours, our co-workers, our parents and our grandparents.

People in our communities are suffering right now. I urge the government to take this crisis seriously, to listen to municipalities and front-line service providers and to act immediately, both to prevent people from becoming homeless and to build the affordable, accessible housing Ontarians urgently need today.

Adjournment Debate

Education funding

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): The member for Ottawa South has given notice of dissatisfaction with the question given by the Minister of Education. The member has up to five minutes to debate the matter, and the minister or parliamentary assistant may reply for up to five minutes.

Mr. John Fraser: Thank you very much, Speaker, and, as I usually do, I want to thank the table, yourself and everybody who has to hang around because we are doing a late show. Particularly, the government House leader said he was going to hang around today.

I'm kind of like Steve Earle: I ain't ever satisfied. I was not particularly satisfied with the answer to the question I got—I think it was last week—about education and about what the minister was doing to make sure that our schools were safe places to learn and to work.

Now, we know that class sizes have grown under this government. We know that special education has been starved about \$850 million a year that boards have to find somewhere else, because the government doesn't send it. We also know we have a mental health crisis in our schools, which is just reflective of what's going on in our broader society, but it's affecting our kids. And what the minister is saying is, it's more important that we look at these people over here. He's distracting us by pointing his finger at the governance.

School boards are important because schools belong to the families and the communities that they serve. For almost 200 years, that's the way we've approached it here in Ontario. We understood that places like Thunder Bay are different from Ottawa; they are different from Windsor; they are different from Timiskaming. Schools belong to the communities.

Looking at the governance, looking at boards, looking at that right now is not the most important thing that's affecting our kids; it's that our schools aren't safe places to learn or to work.

If the government wants to mess around and crack some eggs and make an omelette in education and governance, have at it. As long as it's local, democratic, transparent and effective, I don't care whether there are five trustees, 20 trustees or whatever it is. Schools belong to the communities and the families that they serve. They are local.

What I've seen, especially in the last week or so, is the Minister of Education treating it like education is a one-man show; that he's going to run everything from his office here at Queen's Park. It's not going to work. Keeping the EQAO results back for two months, sitting on his desk because he wanted to study them, shows that he didn't fundamentally understand what those results were for. They weren't just for the minister; they were for the people who help our kids learn: the educators, the supervisory officers, the children's families. There was no reason for him not to put that out.

Now he's taken over the board and appointed himself as supervisor. He's saying, "I'm going to do something at the board. It's going to be a couple months from now. I'm really disappointed in how the ministry did in terms of EQAO results." So now, along with blaming the trustees, he's blaming his ministry when, in actual fact, this government has been on that side for almost eight years, so if you want to look at those EQAO results, the government wears all of it. Those kids? They were there in those eight years. It's a report card on the government. And what that report card for government says is we failed our kids. Our class sizes got too big. We weren't doing what we needed to do to support kids with exceptional needs in special education, and we have a mental health crisis that we didn't address. That's why those results are there.

People talk about funding formulas and underfunding; I prefer to talk about outcomes. The outcomes are really an indicator of what the input was. When you have class sizes that are too big, when you have special education being starved, when you have a mental health crisis that's being ignored and you have EQAO results that show—especially in grade 6 in math scores—that kids are declining, it's a function of those inputs that we get the result, that we have an output, which is the government has failed our students. The EQAO tells us that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I look to the member from Essex.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I'm pleased to stand this evening and address the concerns raised by the member from Ottawa South and talk about this government's focus on ensuring student success in Ontario.

Since being elected, this government has invested record amounts in public education. We've increased per-pupil funding by more than 23% and special education funding by over 36%, supporting the hiring of thousands of additional classroom staff to help address the chronic underfunding left behind by the previous Liberal government.

The facts are clear: According to the independent Financial Accountability Officer, the ratio of teachers to students has remained virtually unchanged for the past eight years. Despite the rhetoric from the opposition, the numbers show that our government has sustained and strengthened staffing levels in our schools.

But as the Minister of Education has said repeatedly, what really matters to parents is the success of their students and results. The EQAO results released just last week show

encouraging signs that our back-to-basics strategy is working. They also showed, particularly when it comes to math, that we can do better. That is why the minister has ordered a comprehensive review of the EQAO results, aimed at understanding not just the results themselves, but the differences between boards—why some are succeeding and others are improving less.

Parents deserve transparency, teachers deserve that clarity and students deserve a system that puts their success first. While our government focuses on raising standards and strengthening accountability, the opposition unfortunately continues to defend the status quo, defending trustees who have failed in their most basic duty, which is serving students.

This brings me to school board governance, an area where the need for reform has never been more urgent. Far too many boards have been consumed by internal bickering, financial mismanagement and a complete lack of accountability. That is why this government brought forward Bill 33, which is legislation designed to restore order, strengthen governance and ensure boards remain focused on what actually matters: student achievement.

Just take a look, for example, at the Near North District School Board, a board so dysfunctional that parents went months without clear communication, trustees spent more time fighting each other than doing their jobs and, because of the failure of trustees, students in Parry Sound were forced to learn in a half-demolished school.

A government review exposed serious mismanagement and dereliction of duty. Families demanded action, and this government listened. The minister placed that board under supervision using the powers granted through Bill 33, helping to get that board back on track. While the opposition shrugs at these failures and tells parents to simply wait until the next election, we believe students cannot wait. They deserve accountability now, and that's exactly what we're providing.

Our government is building a modern, accountable education system rooted in high standards and student success. We're investing billions to repair and build schools, strengthen literacy and math instruction, supporting teachers and ensuring that every dollar is spent where it belongs—in the classroom, not on luxury trips, not on personal expenses or endless trustee infighting.

At the end of the day, our mission is simple: Support students, support parents, support teachers and ensure an education system that delivers real results. We are focused on a future where every student in Ontario, regardless of where they live, has the opportunity to thrive. We will continue raising standards, demanding accountability and ensuring that resources go directly to the classroom, where they make the greatest difference, because this is what the students deserve. Students deserve nothing less.

Education funding

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): The member for Kingston and the Islands has given notice of dissatisfaction with the answer to a question given by the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Education. The member has up to five minutes to debate the matter, and the minister or parliamentary assistant may reply up for to five minutes.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I want to talk about my riding of Kingston and the Islands where the school boards are rather healthy. Last week, there was a parents' forum in my riding of Kingston and the Islands, and one of the things they talked about was evacuations. That's when a kid becomes

violent and they have to move all of the students out of the classroom for one or two hours before the disturbance is resolved and the rest of the kids can safely return to the classroom. I found out that evacuations happen about once per week on average in my riding. Maybe that's disturbing education, and it's something we should be concerned about.

I think everybody on both sides of the House is concerned about EQAO scores and student success, but we should be paying attention to the unprecedented level of violence in schools. What that means is that an old ratio of adults to kids doesn't work when kids have changed and society has changed and there's more violence in schools.

So maybe things like evacuations or other lesser disturbances are taking away the ability of kids to concentrate. I remember, when I was little, the ability to focus one's attention—and I was fortunate; I grew up in a household and in a school where I could do that. The ability to focus is critical to doing things like learning math.

Here's another poignant thing that came up at the parents' forum. Many of the little kids are seeing that something is about to happen to one of their classmates, that one of their classmates is not doing well, and they are intervening to prevent problems. There are problems occurring that the little kids are seeing, and they try to prevent these problems from escalating into violence. I'm so impressed that little kids know when something is wrong and that they do try to fix the situation. It gives me hope in people. It tells me that people are basically good. But little kids shouldn't be counted on to do the job of trained adults.

When this government is spending money on a tunnel under the 401, putting alcohol in corner stores and spending money on Ontario Place, when they're adding to the contingency fund in the middle of the year—usually the contingency fund is drawn down over the course of a year; they added billions to the contingency fund in the middle of the year—why can't we pay for more adults per student in our schools when violence is up and disturbing education?

At that same parent forum that we had in Kingston and the Islands, we had some educational assistants, and one of them showed everybody the scars on her hands from students—little kids who are gouging her hands. It was like, "Touch my scars, if you don't believe me." She's been slapped and punched and verbally abused, and stories like this are all too common.

What's going to happen when all these little kids who are violent in the classroom and all the kids who are suffering the disruption grow up? What's going to happen to our society when they grow up and they have to become the adults in society?

Let me read another testament from a parent in Kingston and the Islands. This parent says: "My son is 15 and in grade 10. He's been diagnosed with autism, ADHD, anxiety, and depression. He has an IEP and has been formally identified with an IPRC meeting. He really struggles to get through an entire day of school and has yet to complete a week in its entirety this year. Last year he was assaulted by other students at school which added to his anxiety about being there. He has a hard time articulating why he has a hard time being there, but tries. He has very supportive teachers, administrators, and an adolescent support worker that he sees once a week, but they are busy and can't really meet him as much as he needs. He needs an educational assistant, but there just isn't anyone available. He falls behind on his work from being absent and then spirals into being discouraged and overwhelmed. We really feel like if he had a regular EA to help guide him through his school day, to support him when he's overwhelmed, to talk to him when he's feeling like he can't do something, and stay on top of his

assignments he would be so successful. He's a really bright, kind kid who's getting lost in the system despite caring educators who are really stretched thin."

Speaker, this is a testament to what's going on in our schools. Ontario schools aren't safe places to learn or work. Violence is up 77%, and Ontario kids are not receiving supports they need to succeed.

Ontario Liberals are calling for a \$1-billion investment to restore safety, to increase the ratio of trained adults to students or reduce class sizes, and give students the support that they urgently need.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): In response, I recognize the member from Burlington.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: I rise today to address an issue that's deeply concerning to parents, teachers and students across Ontario: the rise of violence in our classrooms.

Speaker, our responsibility is clear: to ensure that every child, including our most vulnerable learners, can learn in a safe, supportive environment where their success is a priority.

We need to begin by acknowledging a reality that families and educators know all too well: Some students with developmental disabilities may at times display violent or unsafe behaviours. These situations are not a result of bad intentions, but are often connected to the complex challenges these students face. Our obligation is to provide the right supports, and that is exactly why this government has made record investments in special education. Since 2018, we have increased special education funding by over 36%, bringing annual funding to \$3.85 billion, the highest level in Ontario's history. This includes funding that has supported the hiring of more than 4,000 additional education assistants—adults who are in classrooms every day, helping our most vulnerable students succeed.

Let's be clear: These supports would not exist today had we followed the lead of the previous Liberal government, whose decades of chronic underfunding of special education forced school boards across Ontario to cut essential programs and front-line supports for our most vulnerable students. It's precisely because of those years of neglect that our government had to step up and make these increased investments.

But Speaker, even with these historic investments, we recognize there is more work to do. For example, we've heard from parents, families and advocates across Ontario that practices around the use and monitoring of seclusion rooms vary widely, creating uncertainty for families and for educators. That is why the minister has asked the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services to lead conversations with stakeholders to gain a clear picture of what is happening on the ground and to help inform a consistent, student-centred provincial approach that strengthens safety and supports for our most vulnerable learners.

Speaker, while these efforts are essential to supporting students with special education needs, we must also recognize there are issues around rising violence that are not connected to students with developmental disabilities. The unfortunate truth is that many schools around the province are seeing rising incidents of violence, and the decisions made by some school boards have made the situation worse. Starting in 2017, several school boards made the short-sighted decision to remove police from schools. These decisions were driven by ideology rather than by evidence, and the consequences have been felt by students and staff alike.

When police are present in schools, they do more than ensure safety. They mentor students, they build relationships, they support youth at risk and they help prevent gang involvement. In fact, according to the TDSB's own data, the vast majority of students said these officers made them feel safer, and staff overwhelmingly viewed them as valuable partners.

Yet some trustees eliminated these programs anyway, ignoring the evidence, ignoring the voices of students and ignoring the voices of teachers. That is exactly why our government passed Bill 33. For too long, trustees in some boards have failed to uphold their responsibility to students. Bill 33 gives the minister the tools needed to restore accountability and ensure school boards work with police services to bring youth engagement and anti-gang officers back into schools. This is not about policing classrooms; it's about creating safer, more supportive learning environments and making sure students have trusted adults they can turn to.

Speaker, the message from this government is clear: We will not allow ideology, chaos or trustee mismanagement to stand in the way of student safety. Every student deserves a safe classroom, every educator deserves a safe workplace and every parent deserves peace of mind, knowing their child is protected. Our government will continue investing in the staff, resources and accountability measures needed to keep our schools safe.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): There being no further matters to debate, pursuant to standing order 36(c), I deem the motion to adjourn to be carried.

This House now stands adjourned until 9 a.m. tomorrow morning.