

Putting Student Achievement First Act, 2026

Resuming the debate adjourned on April 14, 2026, on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 101, An Act to amend various Acts in respect of education and child care

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Further debate?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I appreciate the opportunity to address this bill this morning. Speaker, you won't be shocked to learn that I am not a fan of this bill, and I hope in the course of the next few minutes to talk a bit about what things are in this bill that I find problematic—a few things.

First off, there is nothing in this bill that will actually improve outcomes for students or ensure that they have smaller class sizes. If you are concerned about what is happening in our schools, if you are concerned about the future of the next generation, you should be talking about those issues. They should be at the centre of what you are doing. That is not going to be something coming out of this bill. There is not a focus on special education or mental health supports. And as I talk to teachers, I talk to parents and, frankly, as I talk to students, they say to me, "We aren't seeing the resources in those areas that we need to see."

I'm not seeing in this bill any commitment to ensuring that those resources are there. In fact, there are not even commitments to basic resources like pencils. Now, I know the minister has said, "We will be giving an allowance to each teacher so they can buy pencils and paper and so on." I know this sounds strange, but typically in an organization, you have a budget for supplies. You make sure there are adequate supplies so that if a teacher needs supplies for a classroom, they can go to a storage room and get them. The idea that they have not been properly funded and you have to have a special allowance for teachers does not make sense. That is not a good purchasing policy.

This bill doesn't put students first. This is about making sure that the Minister of Education is in a far stronger position than that minister has been in the past. And as you are well aware, the amount of money that is being spent per student, adjusted for inflation, has been dropping. So if you actually think that students are important, if you think that education is important, you would be ensuring that budgets were inflation-adjusted and that the students were getting the inputs they need to be successful.

This bill gives the minister more power, and it seems, frankly, to be set up to discourage people from running to be a trustee. That's of interest to me in part because the minister has said that if there are situations where people don't run, then he will be appointing trustees. I don't think having a minister appoint the trustees on a board of education makes sense, certainly not in terms of responsibility to the people as a whole.

I know that democracy is a weird idea. Winston Churchill once said it was the worst of all possible systems, except for the others. I think that the election of decision-makers makes a lot of sense in an open society. When I talk to people who are unhappy with a trustee, I say, "Vote them out. There's going to be an election. If you don't think they're up to snuff, vote them out. Run yourself, if you think you're in a position to do that, and if you're not in a position to do that, find someone else who you think is good and support them."

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I think vesting the power in the minister, who is effectively untouchable by the mass of parents, does not make sense in an open and free society. It's a substantial mistake.

Now, it's interesting that the bill mentions liability 43 times, while mentioning students five times and classrooms zero times. It's been interesting to me to watch the bills coming forward from this government that consistently include a clause, or multiple clauses, protecting the minister or civil servants from legal liability for carrying out the act. I don't remember that being a feature of bills in the past; I think I would've noticed it. You have to ask, what is it in the minds of the politicians who direct the drafting of these bills that they think they need protection from legal action? Is it that they understand the consequences of what they're doing and realize that it's going to lead to legal action on the part of parents, teachers, communities? Or is it just an all-purpose "I don't like to have anyone giving me a hard time" approach to life? It's not clear to me.

Some of the new powers for the minister: establishing policies that assess student achievement. During the technical briefing that our caucus staff got, they said this was so the minister could require exams for all grade 9 to 12 students and change how grades are calculated across the province to have one standard that includes attendance. I don't have a particular rejection of the idea of exams, but it may be that in different school boards and in different schools with different populations you need to have a different method of assessing student achievement, a different method of determining what is actually being learned and a different method of understanding how to get students to perform at their peak.

This bill gives the minister power to set regulations regarding budgets, including giving himself the power to approve board budgets in certain circumstances and banning school boards from paying certain expenses. In the briefing, ministry staff said the minister would approve budgets when trustees don't approve the CEO's budget, which basically means trustees are at the mercy of the CEO and his budget. So you have to ask, if the trustees actually can't decide what the budget is for their board—if the CEO gets to run back to daddy and say, "They don't like my budget. They're not voting for my budget. We need to cut a lot of teachers; we need to cut a lot of support staff; we need bigger classes, and they're resisting that. Minister, please step in and make sure that my budget is passed," that's effectively what's happening here. So you have a continued shell of elected trustees but, in fact, the power has shifted fundamentally away from local communities and to the minister.

Now, I know—and some people in the House may dispute this—that Toronto is not popular in the rest of Ontario. My colleagues have said to me—

Interjections.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I even got applause for that one. Some colleagues have said to me—the best line they have is, "Do you really want some person in Toronto deciding what happens in your community?"

MPP Wayne Gates: No.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: See? I got even more support for that.

The idea that the minister is setting things up so that the old line, "Hey, it's just Toronto dictating again," is actually made real—it is made real. Local boards of trustees will essentially be subject to the minister, and in many ways they will be flack-catchers. I don't think that this is a good way to operate any sort of democratic system. And I have to note as well the move by the minister to

reduce the number of trustees—cap the number of trustees—in a board. So in Toronto, there are 22 trustees. This will be brought down to 12—roughly, one trustee for every two ridings.

Speaker, as you are well aware, the average size of a riding is 100,000 people, so that means one trustee for 200,000 people; 200,000 is bigger than most cities and communities in this province. It is a problematic number. I thought one trustee for 100,000 was a problem, but for 200,000, it makes it extraordinarily difficult for anyone to actually deal on a day-to-day basis with the concerns that people bring about their child's education.

I'll say to the members sitting on the government side, if you're not doing casework in education now, believe me, you'll be doing it in the future. I've been getting that education casework because people realize that the power has shifted from the board to the minister. It is extraordinarily difficult for us, as MPPs, to do that on top of the other casework that we do. But the reality is, when your parent and your child has got a problem in a school—a school is not working properly—you are going to jump in, and there are vast seas of detail that one has to address when one is addressing education.

What this will mean is that, increasingly, parents will not actually be able to have the advocacy for their children or their communities that they need to have. That is a big step backwards in a democratic society. It is a fundamental mistake on the part of this government.

The bill gives expanded powers to the minister to determine what constitutes a valid trustee expense, including the power to block payment of expenses to certain persons or for certain purposes.

You know, if a trustee or any politician makes a stupid spending mistake, then they should be held accountable in the court of public opinion. That should damage them politically. People should know about that. But to have the minister determine what is a valid expense or not, as opposed having the people decide, is a mistake. That gives the minister power, should they decide to exercise it, to be vindictive in dealing with the expenses of any individual trustee. That is not the role of the provincial government in a democratic society. That is the role of the electorate.

Now, that electorate needs to be well-informed. There needs to be the media coverage that will surface those bad actors, but that's what democracy is about.

The bill will set communications policies for boards that will include "public communications made by ... board members acting as representatives of the board."

In fact, this could put us in a situation where the minister doesn't like what a trustee is saying about the situation they're facing. Maybe a trustee is saying to the parents, "Hey, there have been ongoing cuts to education budgets, and that is affecting our ability to provide appropriate class sizes, appropriate supports in the school, appropriate staffing in the school. If you're upset, go the minister." The minister will be in a position to disallow that and only allow happy talk in the notes coming out from trustees or the emails coming out from trustees. That does not make any sense.

Again, if a trustee is communicating inappropriately, vote them out. If any of us are behaving inappropriately—well, sorry; early morning—vote us out. That is the way things get corrected in a democratic system and the way we need to have things set up because if, in fact, the decision

makers are not accountable to the public, you get bad decisions. Again, Churchill was right: Democracy is profoundly flawed but better than all the other flawed systems.

Boards will now have to have the minister's approval to acquire new land. This worries me because, as you are well aware with this government, games around land seem to be a pretty common thing.

MPP Wayne Gates: This is what this is all about.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: One member said this is what this is all about, and that member may be entirely correct. We went through the greenbelt scandal, where the Premier was giving, effectively, an \$8.6-billion gift to a bunch of his buddies, people who had come to his daughter's wedding, an outcome that is now under investigation by the RCMP.

We had decisions about a landfill in Dresden, Ontario, where, prior to an election, the government pulled back and said, "No, no, we'll have a full environmental assessment." As soon as the election is over—boom—the landfill goes ahead. Again, it was pointed out widely in the media that the owners of that landfill had very close financial connections with the ruling party.

The potential for abuse of the public purse and the public trust are profound, and turning that over to the minister—particularly to a government that has shown, on an ongoing basis, its weakness, let's say, to pressure from buddies who are going to make big bucks—is not a good idea. It's not a good idea for education, and it's not a good idea for the public purse.

The minister can appoint someone to oversee a capital project, including building, expanding, renovating or repairing a school building, and that includes every component, including the contracts. Seriously? You're going to have management of, I guess in Toronto's case, a multi-billion-dollar corporation where the minister reaches in to mess with every contract? If you're talking about red tape, if you're talking about decision-making being—what could I say—lost in a maze of approvals, this is a classic example. If you've got a board of education, you've got elected trustees; you have professional managers. Let them make those decisions, and if they mess up, vote them out—vote them out. If they do good, re-elect them. But effectively having the minister inserted at every layer of substantial decision-making in a board of education does not make sense.

Interestingly, this line, that boards need approval to create or continue to "operate ... a school board controlled entity"—and it was pointed out by our critic that there are not a lot of examples of school board-controlled entities in Ontario beyond the Toronto Lands Corp. One has to ask if, in fact, that's the aim here because the Toronto Lands Corp. has control of school board properties, and the opportunity for development and the opportunity for speculative profits from development on school lands are immense, particularly in Toronto.

I have to say that there's often a short-sighted approach to school lands. I represent Toronto–Danforth. A few decades ago, a school at Logan and Danforth, Frankland, was scheduled for closure, demolition and sale of land. The local community fought hard against that, and they were successful; they were able to retain the school. Within a decade of saving that school, the school playground was full of portables because the demographics had changed. Families that dominated in that neighbourhood, which have had their children—people were moving into their 50s, 60s and 70s and didn't have kids anymore. The attendance at the school dropped. Those people moved out, passed on, a whole new generation came in with kids, and the school was

flooded. I've seen over the decades the portables expand and shrink, expand and shrink. There are demographic waves.

You have to know that in a city like Toronto—frankly, Hamilton, Sarnia, Windsor—you're going to get demographic waves. When you lose that school property, your ability to get that property back so that you can actually provide that service is close to nil. It is close to nil. So I believe we have to safeguard that property, and having this government, with all its focus on land deals, suddenly have access to a big portfolio of what will be extraordinarily valuable land in the city of Toronto is something that I find very disturbing, very worrying.

Now, the bill, again, as I noted—57 clauses regarding protection of the minister, cabinet and the minister's appointees against legal cases. There's only one clause on student achievement. That is a real concern.

MPP Wayne Gates: I thought they were tough on crime.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Someone has just said, "I thought they were tough on crime."

If you are constantly trying to pull yourself out of the legal system, if you have written this bill and you understand that you may be in deep legal trouble, then I can see why you would be writing all this get-out-of-jail-free card stuff into the bill. I don't think that serves the public purpose. I think that it makes sense that those who make decisions have to live with the consequences of those decisions, and this sort of thing says no.

I have to touch on two other things in the brief time left to me. One is that we have got a huge problem in Ontario with a lack of teachers and teachers effectively being demoralized and driven out of the system. That is something that causes disruption in individual classrooms and in individual schools. I have teachers come to me and say, "Why do they have such a low opinion of teachers? Why are we seen as a problem and not as a solution to a problem?" I think this government has done a lot to demoralize teachers.

I want to talk very briefly about the question of truancy. There was an interesting article in the Star this morning about how truancy has soared since the pandemic. At the beginning of the current government's term in 2018, truancy was a lot less than it is now. Has anyone done an analysis of what this government's policies have done to cause a huge increase in truancy? Is this something related to the way the education system is running, or is this related to a tougher and tougher economic environment in which students are increasingly taking work outside of school to keep their families afloat and to—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Stephen Blais: I listened intently to your presentation. Thank you very much.

I do agree with you that if things were reduced to 200,000 per trustee, that would be a lot of constituents to try to represent. I think, though, that that representation forgets the fact that there are four different school boards. So the trustees don't represent the entirety of the population; they represent the people who vote within that school board.

I'm hoping it doesn't reveal your view that there should only be one school board. I'm hoping you can reiterate your support for fully funded Catholic and French education in Ontario.

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Mr. Peter Tabuns: I don't often say this but thank you. That is a really good question, and I am very appreciative.

Yes, we need to have francophone education. We need to have Catholic education. We need a full range of publicly funded education in this province so that all communities are included and equally respected.

In terms of the number of trustees, I think that local communities should determine how many representatives they need. What is the number that is appropriate to ensure that the board is responsive and accountable? Having the minister put a cap on the number of trustees doesn't make sense to me. Obviously, when you're talking about a place like Barrie, Innisfil or you're talking about—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Response?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: You didn't like that response, Speaker? I thought it was a great response.

The number of trustees should reflect the population and the will of the people in that community.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): I recognize the member for Thornhill.

Ms. Laura Smith: I listened to the member opposite. Accountability: We all agree in this House that accountability is important. I think that everyone in this House, specifically the parents—I'm a mother, and for my kids, showing up to class was a priority. It is a priority. Students attending class in high school should be a priority, full stop. This legislation makes attendance part of our students' marks, an idea that, I should mention, came from the teachers.

Will the member opposite support our students and our teachers by supporting this bill, an obvious thing for everyone in Ontario, or Canada for that matter?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I thank the member for the question. I think the question of attendance is a really substantive one. If we are seeing dramatic reduction in the percentage of students attending on a regular basis, that's something that needs to be addressed.

So the question that I think the government has to answer is, why are we seeing the drop in attendance? What is causing that? Are there socio-economic factors that are causing that? Are there problems with the way the schools are operating? Is that causing the problem? Will, in fact, what's being proposed increase attendance, or will it simply mean that students in difficult circumstances are going to be penalized for not showing up?

I think the first task of any government is to understand the basis for something happening so that you can take corrective action. And I have seen no—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Response.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: What is it? What is it that caused a big drop from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic? What caused that drop? If the government can show the studies, it would—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): I recognize the member from Windsor West.

MPP Lisa Gretzky: I appreciate the comments from my colleague from Toronto—Danforth.

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The member for Thornhill asked a question about truancy, and I think my colleague from Toronto–Danforth summed it up quite nicely. It shows just how out of touch you are with what is going on in this province.

There are numerous reasons why students are unable to attend school. It could be for financial reasons. There are several high school students who have to work in order to support a household, to keep a roof over their head or food on the table. We have a record number of youth under your government that are now accessing food banks when they don't have food, when they're hungry. It's very difficult for them to not only go to school but then do well when they are there.

When we're talking about accountability specifically, this government has clauses in here to actually absolve themselves from any accountability.

I would like the member for Toronto–Danforth to explain, maybe, why the government is not focusing on supporting the students in the classrooms—like those with special education needs that are being excluded from schools—but instead focusing on reigning in power for themselves, but also bringing in legislation for them to avoid any accountability for their decisions.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I appreciate the question from the member. There are a few items here. This is a government that does not particularly want to be accountable. That's my experience. That's what I've seen. It will be interesting to see what the RCMP have to say when they finish going through the greenbelt investigation, to see what techniques were used.

And frankly, I'll just point out again that the Premier's actions to protect his phone information from freedom of information says to me that this is a government that does not want to be accountable in any way, shape or form for its activities. Shutting down a fundamental method to allow the public to understand why and how government makes decisions says to me that respect for accountability is out the window.

Why is it that they don't want to be accountable? Maybe they're going to do really bad things.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you to the member from Toronto–Danforth. You mentioned that this whole Bill 101 is about acquiring land. That's the bottom line. Can you maybe explain that? Help us understand how those dots connect.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Thank you for that. I should say that the acquisition of land is not the only thing driving this bill. I think cutting education budgets is another substantial and critical part.

But the acquisition of land—let's face it, all of us: Schools sit on very valuable property in a variety of communities around this province. And the ability to acquire that property and sell it to a buddy at a really good price so they can make a fortune has got to be very tempting for a government that is apparently profoundly driven by speculators and land developers.

When you increase their power and decrease their accountability, the potential for land deals that disadvantage the public and make somebody really wealthy—who will be happy to come to the next wedding thrown by the Premier—is a very real risk.

I appreciate the question, and I think all of us should be very concerned about the potential for—

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The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. John Jordan: Speaker, through Bill 33 and Bill 101, this minister and this government are all about responsibility and accountability to the students, the teachers and the parents.

So no, it's not okay to wait for an election to do as the member says, throw them out, when we know that things have gone off the track—and that's the entire time that someone could be in high school.

So does the member feel that it's okay that a student, the teachers, the parents wait for a system to be corrected in the school board, wait for an election for that correction to happen?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: That is one of the more fascinating questions I've had in my time here, because this is a government that engages in some of the most bizarre behaviour I've seen in my 20 years—under investigation by the RCMP. After the greenbelt, should this government have been thrown out? Damn straight. If there had been an election, you would have been in deep trouble.

So you're telling me that when it comes to trustees, we should have a higher power overrule them, but when it comes to you and your misbehaviour, you should be able to continue on. Should the Premier of Canada be able to reach into the province of Ontario when he sees or she sees inappropriate behaviour and redirect the government of Ontario? Is that what you're saying to me, that governments should be in fact kowtowing to the government above them? Is that what you are saying? Because that is the content of their question.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

MPP Wayne Gates: I don't have a lot of time to get an answer here, but I can tell you, one of my staff is a trustee in Niagara. She does a great job; the board does a great job. They've opened up a couple of schools already. But do you know how she got that job?

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): I cannot hear the member asking their question.

MPP Wayne Gates: Do you know how she got that job, Speaker? She got that job through an election. She was the youngest woman ever to get elected in Niagara as a trustee. She does a great job and has opened up a couple of new schools.

Do you believe that this is nothing more about control rather than—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Response?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Well, I think this is about setting aside elections. I think this is a bill about making sure democracy has no impact on the education system—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Further debate? I recognize the member for Ajax.

Interjections.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Hey, hey.

Well, thank you, Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to—

Interjections.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: It's still early, folks. I don't have the same jokes as the member from Ottawa South, though.

I rise today to speak to this bill, the Putting Student Achievement First Act.

Speaker, I think if we're being honest about what's in front of us today, in my view, I don't think that this is a bill that is going to be putting student achievement first. I do think it puts some of the goals of the minister, that the minister has spoken about over the last few months, first. It centralizes power, it continues to weaken local decision-making and, in my view, adds bureaucracy into a system that's already under strain.

While I think the government is focused more on control and controlling school boards from Queen's Park, just like we're seeing with municipalities and conservation authorities—there is a theme with this government that everything can just be run out of right here in this building or the lovely office buildings that are just down the road—it's going to be impacting students, educators and families that are still dealing with the real issues within our classrooms.

After eight years, people aren't asking for some governance changes—and which I think the government is using as a distraction from the real issues that are happening in public education. Families, educators, students are asking for help. They're asking for smaller class sizes. They're asking for safer schools, and they're asking for real support for their kids, especially kids with special needs. I don't believe that's what the government here is delivering to them.

Speaker, this bill doesn't fix education; it simply reorganizes a part of it. It adds a new layer of bureaucracy, moving essentially the finance official to be the CEO—a bit of a shell game. It continues the trend of centralizing power in the ministry, and it's taking power away from local communities. Boards are going to be weakened and decisions are going to be pulled back into Queen's Park. Meanwhile, again, nothing changes for students within the classroom—class sizes being too large, schools not being made safer and supports remaining inadequate.

In some ways, it's really more about managing optics. It's kind of saying, "Oh, we're doing something. The government is doing something. The government is fixing education." But really, it isn't. It is just leaving the same issues that we have on the table. It's about the perception of creating these kinds of changes. It's not a bad communications exercise from the government, but students and families and educators are going to feel that within the classroom.

This government still refuses to deal with class sizes. Classrooms are getting bigger and students are getting less support. Since 2018, Ontario has lost nearly 5,000 classroom educators. Fewer educators mean more students per class and less time for each child. Teachers, they're stretched thin. Students, they're falling behind. This bill does nothing to change that—not one measure to reduce class sizes, not one plan to put more adults into classrooms. You can't improve student achievement when students are packed into overcrowded classrooms. Teachers can't give that individual attention. Students who are struggling fall behind, and students with complex needs go unsupported. That's what's happening right now across Ontario, Speaker.

I think of a school board in Algoma, the Catholic board there. I believe, in talking to educators there, we've got some classes where a teacher is teaching five split grades. Imagine that: teaching five split grades in a class of about 30. That's really challenging. You've got some

boards, okay, three split grades—which I still think is too much. Imagine doing that. Those are some of the things that I think that this government should be looking at. They like to talk about schools in rural communities; well, this is one way to improve education in schools in rural communities. I think that would be a very important step. We don't see something like that within this bill.

Violence in our schools is rising, and the government is failing to act. Educators are reporting more violent incidents, more disruptions and more unsafe classrooms, and it's tied directly to unmet student needs and a lack of supports. But instead of addressing it, the government is looking the other way. It does nothing to reduce violence; it does nothing to support staff dealing with it in the classroom. And you can't expect students to achieve if students and teachers don't feel safe, so when violence increases, every student pays the price. Learning is disrupted, classrooms become unstable, teachers are forced into crisis management instead of what they are meant to do: teaching. That is the reality that this government is truly ignoring.

Knocking on doors last summer, I had a parent tell me that he's thinking about putting his kids into private school. I was shocked to hear that, but I asked why. He said that because of the disruptions in the classroom, because of the challenges in the classroom, because of the lack of adults in the classroom, his kids, who just want to achieve, his kids, who just want to do well and go after their true potential, are not getting the support that they need. It's not because of the teacher. It's because of the way this education system has been structured and dealt with. It's failing our students.

Safety in our schools should be a top priority. I think this bill is going to make things worse. It eliminates the requirement for school climate surveys, the very tools that track safety, bullying, student well-being, physical safety. That means less data, less accountability and fewer warning signs. We'll know less about what students are experiencing, about if they're being bullied, about if they feel safe or if they have struggles with their mental health.

This government, in some ways, is choosing to fly blind. You can't improve safety if you refuse to measure it, and it means that administrators and principals won't have the data and the information that they need in order to do targeted interventions in classrooms or schools. When you're building school culture and managing change in communities and trying to build that up, it's not something where you flick on a light switch and it happens overnight. You need to build trust within school communities, and that means spending the extra time.

I used to work at a school board. We had 135 different schools—it's a big system. We've got bigger systems and smaller systems, systems where schools are really spread out in rural areas where the principal really is the person who's there. To have data, to have tools—and with central office knowing what's going on, they're able to provide that support. That's really, really important because there are going to be some schools where you need to work to improve the school climate and culture, whether it's among staff, whether it's among students, whether it's the relationship between families and the school. I think this is going to be taking a step back.

Choosing not to collect data doesn't make problems disappear. Burying your head in the sand does nothing, and it makes the challenges that students are dealing with much harder.

None of this happens in isolation. It affects the people holding the system together every day, our educators and our support staff, who come in because they love teaching. They love seeing the smiling faces of kids in the school, and they love being able to support those kids to go on

and hopefully one day be here in this chamber or achieve whatever success that they want to in life.

Speaker, there's a growing teacher retention problem in this province. Educators are leaving the profession, especially within their first five years, and they're leaving for a reason. Larger class sizes, rising violence, increasing workload and fewer supports: Those are daily realities in our schools. The government knows this, and they refuse to act on dealing with retention. This bill doesn't do anything to improve working conditions, nothing to retain experienced educators. You can't have a strong education system if you can't keep teachers in it.

The government will say, "Well, we're changing the teacher college so we can recruit new teachers and make it easier to do so." But really, the best solution when we're talking about retention is to retain experienced educators who are passionate and wanted to go into education in the first place.

When I speak to those educators, some of them are sad that they choose to leave public education, but they're doing that for their own well-being. They're doing that for their own mental health.

I think that is a failure of this government that we've seen the last eight years, Speaker, because when experienced educators leave, students lose. They lose that mentorship, stability and quality instruction, and it's how systems decline.

Speaker, nowhere is that more evident than in special education. Special education in our province is in crisis. Students with disabilities aren't getting the support that they need. Educators are being asked to do more with fewer resources. It's leaving vulnerable students behind, and it's putting pressure on every classroom.

Yet this bill doesn't do anything to fix special education—no new funding, no new supports, no plan. I don't believe this government can claim to support students, Speaker, by abandoning the students who need the most help. I know those students, if they receive that help, will be able to achieve their true potential.

When looking through the bill, there are a lot of elements to this, and it is a pretty big bill. I do feel in some ways it really is moving the shell game around. Let's talk about some of these matters.

When it comes to the TDSB going from 22 to 12, I don't know how those elections are going to work, quite frankly, over this really large geographical area. I think that's probably going to be a challenge for them to sort out. I do question what is going on there because when you are overseeing a much larger area, I think it's going to be very challenging to be able to respond to parents, to be able to help parents and help folks. That's how I look at it when it comes to the TDSB context itself.

I think a lot more thinking really needed to be done. It felt like this bill was, in some ways, a bit of a rush job because there was this debate that we were seeing out in the public: "Are we going to get rid of trustees or not?" or "What are we going to do?"

Ultimately, the government decided not to get rid of trustees, which I do think, Speaker, was the right call. But the way in which this has been organized, the way in which this has been set up, it really feels like it's a government and a Ministry of Education that's a little bit in crisis

management mode, trying to figure out, “How do we save face? We’ve talked tough for so long on this, and now this is what it is.”

It really doesn’t change overall very much the structure of our public education system. There are a lot of school boards where there are some challenges among trustees and, unfortunately, that serves as a distraction from what the focus needs to be within the classroom. So I do acknowledge that there need to be some changes around how school board governance is operated, around governance training, for example, Speaker, but I’m seeing this, and I don’t know that this is necessarily going to be the right approach because we’re just moving the chess pieces all over the table again.

When I talk about the ministry’s supervision powers being expanded, I think this really appears—now that the ministry has control of—what are we at now, six boards, something like that? I’ve lost track of how many boards are under supervision. I think now they’re realizing, “Oh, wait, we didn’t think about this. Oh, wait, we didn’t think about that,” and in some ways it’s, again, Queen’s Park. This is the direct way that Queen’s Park is able to control school boards right now. I said it before, when the previous education bill was here, that at the end of the day I think it is going to be a land play for those school boards.

If we look at Peel region, the Peel District School Board owns a very, very large swath of land. I fear—because everything seems to revolve around land and development with this government—they are going to be looking at that property and, “How do we give that property away?” There are properties in Toronto, properties in Ottawa, properties in school boards all across this province, Speaker, that are I think the government is looking at, that I think those supervisors are looking at. I think it is the backdoor way in order to remove some important public properties from communities but do it in a way that doesn’t involve the public consultation that’s needed, do it in a way that may very well set those boards further back.

There are properties that should be supplused and that should be sold, absolutely; I will not deny that within our public education system. But I think the way in which it’s being done, frankly—I can’t trust this government to do it.

I’ve heard some positive feedback on the changes to teachers’ college. I know that’s always a bit of a debate among folks: Should it be the two-year or the one-year? I will give the government some credit because I think they’re trying to do the best in this situation here.

Around school board associations, I think this bill is going to probably mean the end of the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association, and probably the Catholic trustees’ association as well, by very likely removing the fees that are paid to those organizations. The important part, though, that some of those organizations do play is that they are able to bring together folks that are involved in public education from around the province. It’s things like professional development, things like connections. We’ve got 72 school boards across the province, so I think it’s really important that that communication happens there; otherwise it’s Queen’s Park again putting its head down.

Around some of the bargaining changes, I think the jury will be out on that. I know the minister was making a point to say that trustees shouldn’t be responsible for bargaining, but I want to make very clear that the folks working at OBSPA that are doing that bargaining are professional human resource officials, they are professional negotiators. They are professional. It’s not some trustee anywhere in this province saying, “This is how we’re negotiating.” That’s not the case,

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Speaker, and I feel it's a bit disingenuous when it's being referred to as otherwise. Again, it's a bit of a distraction, a smokescreen. It's a distraction from the real issues that are going on within public education.

When we look at defining education materials, my colleague from Orléans asked a question the other day around learning materials and actually going back a bit to books and pen and paper. I think that's an important distinction there, and that's something this government really does need to be thinking about. I think the government also needs to be thinking about some of these e-learning courses that are now currently being offered, that students can access in school boards across the province—not necessarily with the school district that you're at but another one. And these e-learning courses don't really have very many attendance requirements: "Oh, you've just got to log on once a day." There's no verification or knowing what those students are actually doing or not in those courses. Then, when it comes time for assessment, when it comes time for exams, now, with the rise of AI, what educators are telling me is that they're seeing students using AI. They're seeing students use that in order to complete sometimes very complex questions. When educators ask the student after, "Can you show your work on that?" the student just laughs. I think there's some gaps here that this government can be looking at because, in some ways, I feel like grades are being artificially inflated.

They want to talk about school graduation. I'm seeing kids graduating grade 12 that can't read or write properly, can't do math properly. That is a problem. That's going to set that individual back, but it's going to set our society back as well.

I think one positive element could be—and it will depend on what the regulation says—that I think there are some elements where it does make a little bit of sense to standardize amongst school boards, to provide a little bit more consistency, to in some ways create the box. I know, maybe some of my former colleagues or folks I know may not fully agree with that, but I do think, between school boards, it makes a lot of sense that you do some of that around communication. But the devil is really going to be in the details. We'll have to see what's in the regulation.

Speaker, requiring ministerial approval for boards purchasing land—in some ways, I think that does make a lot of sense because, ultimately, we're at a point now within school boards where the ministry is fully funding those purchases. So unless the whole financial model of school boards changes, some of that makes sense. But I fear, as I've said before about the sell-off of school land and my fears about how this government will approach it—will it be local communities, or will it be done right straight through for Queen's Park?

Speaker, after eight long years, this government cannot claim that these problems are new. Aside from those that really, frankly, they've created themselves, they've ignored known issues until they've become problems. They've created crisis and chaos, and now they're trying to distract from their own issues that this government has created.

This bill doesn't meet the moment. It doesn't address the crisis in our classrooms. It does not support students, and it does not support educators. It takes power away from communities. It concentrates it in the minister's office even more, and it hopes that no one notices what's missing.

But you know what, Speaker? I've received messages from parents and educators over the last couple days. People do notice. Students are noticing, parents are noticing and educators are

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noticing. And do you know what? As time goes on, they're going to notice more and more that this is a failing government on public education. I would give this government an F on it. And frankly, students, families, educators and everyone in our school system deserves much better than that.

Putting Student Achievement First Act, 2026

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Questions?

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thanks to the member from Ajax for his speech.

Rather than putting student achievement first, this bill is all about putting the Minister of Education and his ego first. It vastly expands his powers and creates a whole new layer of bureaucracy but limits the advocacy and support that parents receive.

I'm wondering if the member could tell us the dangers of creating a whole new layer of bureaucracy in the school system, rather than addressing students' concerns.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: What this bill does is it essentially moves the finance official to potentially be the CEO. And the reality is that unless you are an educator that has worked in the classroom, went up and became a principal and a superintendent, you're not going to know the impact of decisions that are going to affect students and families.

Even some of the best business and financial officials within our province do not have that same context. So to have the director, as an educator, making that final call, I think, is better for students. It's better for families in the systems.

The other thing I would say is that that business official is also the treasurer of the board. Nothing really changes in that way. They already present that budget to the school board. They already go through that process. So it's really just moving pieces around on the table. But at the end of the day, the person now that's going to be in charge, that's going to make the final decision, they will not know the same context and information within the classroom.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Stephen Blais: Thank you for your debate this morning. Part of the bill will require that attendance in class be part of the final grade. I think we can all agree that attendance at work and in life is part of how our employers judge us or how our spouse judges us and how we get judged broadly in society.

Attendance in this place is also a way in which the Premier and the cabinet are graded. They only have to show up to two thirds of all portions of question period and that allows them to achieve 100% of the goal. I'm wondering if you think that the rules around attendance in classrooms should mirror similarly the rules around the Premier and his cabinet's participation and attendance in question period, or lack there of?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Frankly, we don't sit very much in this chamber already, so there are not many opportunities to even be able to ask questions of the government. So when we are sitting, especially with government ministers and the Premier, I think it's really important that we're able to do that.

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The other thing I'll say, though, about this bill and student attendance is that it doesn't take into account that students may be dealing with challenges outside of the classroom. They may be supporting a younger family member who is going to elementary school. They may be supporting their parents. They may need to make some money in order to support their family. This bill doesn't take that into consideration, and I think it will penalize some of the most marginalized students within our schools.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thanks to the member from Ajax for his remarks. Listening to your statements—and I'm grateful for some great points—one thing that we've noticed down our way, in Essex county, has been the trustees themselves and their relationship with the directors of education. Many years ago, back in 2012-13, the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board was put under supervision. Not too long ago, Paul Picard, who was the director of education at the time, said, "You have trustees who are responsible to electors and ... [who] want to get re-elected. There's some reluctance to make the difficult choices. And so at that juncture ... the ministry stepped in to provide assistance."

Further on he says, "On one side there's going to be people saying ... local autonomy begins to erode, but on the other side, to get in this constant cycle of deficit financing, it's going to reach a critical point to where it is impacting ... the most vulnerable."

I know you worked in a board previously. I'm wondering if the director's comments are valid as he said them?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I would say this bill doesn't actually really change much of that in the first place. So that situation there, this bill doesn't really change that. You're still reporting to the board of trustees, so that reporting structure, frankly, doesn't change.

From time to time—and I think we've seen it on municipal councils, which is why there is a bill that did come forward that I don't believe has been enacted or passed yet, to deal with the removal of members. That would be something that we need to start maybe looking at, because ultimately you shouldn't have councillors behaving badly, you shouldn't have trustees behaving badly—because there will be, especially in some of these places, some of that dysfunction.

I would actually put it back to the member and the government to say that that bill they did, they should have included school board trustees in the bill to remove officials that really went afoul of conflict-of-interest rules, and actually have done it in way that it would have been effective.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I listened intently to the remarks from the member for Ajax. I'm interested in his perspective on the fact that this bill includes 57 clauses that reference protecting the minister, the government cabinet and the minister's appointees against legal cases. The bill references the words "liable" or "liability" 43 times.

Would the member care to speculate on what the government needs to give itself immunity from with these extraordinary new powers that are included in this legislation?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: How much time do we have to go through that? I think really it's a government, with this bill, that is not focusing on student achievement. It is focusing on protecting the minister. In terms of what situations it could be, obviously there are some things—

if they're trying to do this—or some things they know that they're going to be doing into the future, whether it's around land, whether it's around other aspects of school board governance or operations.

I think we can brainstorm what a pretty large list it would be. Frankly, it appears to me that it's just a government that's backpedaling on public education, that doesn't actually have a plan, that's scrambling. And then, they're trying to clean up their own messes that they're making.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Stephen Blais: Earlier you mentioned the municipal accountability bill. And about 20 minutes ago in debate, the government member from Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston said it would be inappropriate to allow trustees to continue in their position if they were caught in some form of malfeasance or inappropriate behaviour. I agree.

And yet this is a government that has rejected the idea—voted against the idea—of removing city councillors from office who are sexually harassing their staff. And it's slow-rolling their own bill on that same thing, hoping that we get to municipal election season before they bring it back.

And so I'm wondering why they think it's okay to remove trustees before an election for malfeasance, but they don't agree that removing city councillors for sexual harassment is something that should be done before an election.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Frankly, in this situation—and this highlights why that bill around municipal accountability should have been passed. They actually could have incorporated some provisions within the Education Act as part of that bill in order to provide different levels of discipline for municipal councillors that were acting badly. This is a government that chose not to do that, and it was raised in debate on that bill. It was raised on the sidelines.

And it behooves me as to why this government actually isn't seriously interested in ensuring that our municipal councillors—and I would say even school board trustees—are held accountable for the actions that they take. There's a lot of talk; there's actually not a lot of action, Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Right now, teachers across Ontario are spending hours of their day—personal time—scouring the Internet, looking at sites, Teachers Pay Teachers, just to find basic classroom materials because the system has failed to give them a reliable foundation to work from.

Bill 101 extends the existing Trillium List approach for textbooks to digital and classroom resources, giving teachers a high-quality, ministry-approved base to start from while preserving their own professional flexibilities to supplement with their own materials. Bill 101 is about supporting teachers, not second-guessing them.

Does the member opposite believe Ontario teachers should continue building their own lesson plans, or would you instead support a trusted, vetted set of resources the government has finally given them?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: One, I would say professional judgment is enshrined in the collective agreements that educators have with the province. So the educator's professional judgment should always be there.

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The minister and I have had this conversation, especially around the technology tools, because we've got 72 different school boards in this province and many different processes—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Further debate? I recognize the member for Algoma–Manitoulin.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Good morning, Madam Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to represent the good people of Algoma–Manitoulin and to speak to Bill 101, Putting Student Achievement First Act, 2026, and highlight all the measures the government has done to improve the education system to date.

I'd first like it to be noted that I will be sharing my time with the member from Cambridge.

During this speech, I will go over a few of the changes that Bill 101, if passed by this assembly, will do to strengthen education in the province. We heard this morning some of the debate—we drifted off into the greenbelt, FOI, and that's all easy, but since Minister Calandra has been appointed, his goal has been clear. He has been focused on making sure Ontario's education system supports student success and helps students reach their full potential.

At its heart, this legislation is about student achievement. Our education system must give every student a fair chance to succeed. That starts in the classroom, and it continues through school.

It carries into life beyond graduation. Students need strong foundations in reading, writing and math. They also need practical skills that can use in everyday life, and they need to be prepared for post-secondary education and the jobs that they will take on in the future, whatever those may be. We must keep building a modern education system that supports learning in every classroom.

The latest EQAO results show some real progress. Reading and writing outcomes are at the highest levels since the COVID-19 pandemic, an indication our efforts are working, with many students performing better than ever before. Graduation rates are also at a historic high, which speaks to the hard work of students, families and educators across this province. These results give us confidence that there is improvement.

At the same time, they show us that we can do better. In some areas, especially math, progress has been slower than we would like. Many students are meeting expectations, but we cannot leave any student behind. Certain student groups and some school boards continue to face gaps in achievement. These gaps are not a reflection of effort or ability; they point to places where students need more support.

Our goal is simple: to help every student succeed, no matter where they live or which school they attend. The system is moving in the right direction, and we want to build on that momentum so more students can do even better.

That's why our government has appointed an expert advisory board. Its role is to lead a comprehensive review of student achievement and assessment in Ontario. This review will focus on reading, writing and math; it will look closely at the real causes behind achievement gaps; and it will recommend clear, practical steps to better support teachers, parents and students.

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Speaker, the review will ask important questions, such as: Are the curriculum and learning materials clear and easy to use? Are teachers getting the preparation and support they need? Do students have the right tools to succeed in the classroom?

It will also examine EQAO assessments. The review will consider whether those assessments match what students are learning. It will look at whether they are fair for all students and if the data they generate contributes to improved student achievement. The recommendations will be released publicly. Families, educators and communities deserve to see the steps being taken to improve outcomes for every student.

While this review continues, the government is not standing still. We are already taking action; we cannot afford to wait. A big part of the work is supporting teachers and educators across Ontario. Teachers are the backbone of student success. Strong students depend on strong educators. Ontario has talented teachers and dedicated school staff. Many of our schools are among the best in the country. Our responsibility is to make sure educators have the tools, the resources and the support they need to help students succeed.

Over the past year, the government has taken practical steps to better equip educators with the tools they need in the classrooms. That is why last month, Premier Ford and Minister Calandra announced the Classroom Supplies Fund. We know that many teachers have been paying out of pocket for supplies. While school boards receive funding for classroom resources, we have not always seen those dollars consistently reach every classroom. That is why we are putting funds directly into the hands of teachers who know best what the students need.

Starting this September, eligible elementary teachers will receive \$750 each school year to purchase classroom supplies. Teachers will receive a classroom supplies card directing them to the website and instructions on how to access that site. This website will offer a grade-by-grade selection of commonly used classroom items, including writing materials, notebooks, calculators, arts and crafts supplies, facial tissues and paper towels. This will make it easier for teachers to get what they need without paying upfront or waiting for reimbursement. It also helps create more consistent access to supplies across classrooms. This matters because elementary school sets the foundation for future success. Teachers should never have to hold back because materials are not available.

The government is also taking steps to better support teachers' professional growth. Working with the Ontario College of Teachers, the government has removed long-standing barriers for technology education teachers, teachers of Indigenous languages and teachers of Indigenous ancestry, opening clearer paths into school leadership roles. These changes support career advancement and help attract and retain a strong, diverse teaching workforce.

Last week, Minister Quinn and Minister Calandra announced a shorter, more efficient teacher education program. Hands-on training and strong mentorship help new teachers feel ready for the classroom, which also means they are more likely to stay in the profession. In addition, our government is investing \$16.8 million over three years to increase honoraria for associate teachers. Our goal is to ensure teacher candidates can learn from experienced mentors during their placement.

Speaker, all of this reflects our commitment to support educators so they can continue helping students succeed, and it brings us to the introduction of the Putting Student Achievement First Act, 2026. If passed, the proposed changes in this bill would allow us to improve consistency

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and effectiveness in curriculum delivery by giving teachers the tools they need to support student learning. We are also helping improve student preparedness for post-secondary pursuits and ensuring consistent assessment practices for students in grade 9 to grade 12. These are but a few of the proposed changes that would come into effect if Bill 101 passes.

As mentioned earlier, I will be sharing my time with the member from Cambridge. I'll hand over the debate to him and look forward to questions from my colleagues.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): I recognize the member for Cambridge.

Mr. Brian Riddell: It's always an honour to stand in this place, representing the people of Cambridge. I will be continuing where my colleague from Algoma–Manitoulin left off, highlighting additional areas where Bill 101, if passed, would strengthen education and further support parents, teachers and students all across Ontario.

Strong student outcomes depend on a consistency of high-quality teaching materials in the classroom. Ontario has already provided a government-approved list of textbooks. This approach works quite well. It gives teachers a clear structure for their lessons. It also saves time, so teachers are not required to build everything from scratch. Most importantly, it helps create greater consistency across the classroom.

We want to extend this same approach to other classroom learning materials. Right now, educators rely on a wide range of independently chosen materials; not all of these are clearly aligned with the curriculum. This has led to differences from classroom to classroom and, in some cases, learning materials that are not appropriate for students. That's why what the government wants to do is make sure students have access to high-quality, age-appropriate learning resources. These materials should be aligned with what the students are expected to learn, no matter where they attend school.

Speaker, the proposed changes, if passed, would allow the Ministry of Education to mandate the use of ministry-approved learning resources in classrooms across the province. It would help to ensure a consistent and effective implementation of the curriculum.

Of course, flexibility remains important, with teachers still able to use supplementary materials where needed: for example, to accommodate students' needs, or support denominational or French-language education rights; this would be one of these areas. The government is working on developing classroom resources to be available for the beginning of the 2026-27 school year.

These resources may include lesson plans, student materials—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Thank you.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

Skilled trades

Mr. Brian Riddell: I rise to recognize an important investment in the future of the skilled trades in Ontario. I recently joined Premier Doug Ford and Minister David Piccini in Cambridge to celebrate the grand opening of LIUNA Local 837 training centre, supported by an \$8.8-million investment from our government.

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This new facility is about more than just bricks and mortar. It's about investing in people, skills and opportunity. Skilled trade workers are the backbone of our economy, building our homes, infrastructure and communities. Our government is working to ensure these careers are seen as a first choice, while investing in trades training and creating pathways for the next generation. At a time when new technologies are reshaping the workforce, the skilled trades remain an essential item and in demand.

Before entering public service, I worked as a mechanical millwright and industrial engineer, and I have seen first-hand the pride and discipline this work requires. This training centre will help prepare the next generation right here in Cambridge, a community with a strong and growing trades sector.

I want to thank LIUNA for their leadership in building safer work sites, stronger futures. I congratulate them on this achievement.

Education issues

Ms. Marit Stiles: My question is to the Premier.

Yesterday, the Minister of Education had a lot to say about leadership and what parents and students are asking for. I know he doesn't like to listen to me, but he should at least listen to the people he claims to represent.

The main thing that educators and students and their families and educational experts are saying makes a big impact on students and students succeeding is smaller class sizes. That's it. Every education expert is going to tell you that. That is what works. You could be hiring teachers, you could be hiring more educational assistants, you could be making classrooms smaller instead of laying off another thousand teachers and creating Danielle Smith-style banned book lists.

Why doesn't this government do the obvious thing and hire teachers for smaller class sizes?

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

Hon. Paul Calandra: The Leader of the Opposition is incorrect; I do like listening to her. I find her very fascinating. I just think it's the people of the province of Ontario who don't particularly enjoy listening to the NDP.

This bill that is before the House right now is in addition to Bill 33, of course. It puts more authority, yes, with the Ministry of Education—authority that I would suggest and that I would argue the ministry has downloaded for the last 50 years. Leadership on education should come from the Ministry of Education.

What this bill does, of course, is it listens to our secondary school teachers who have been telling me that they need help when it comes to management of the classroom and that going back to exams for our courses and having that weighted in the course mark is an important part. That's why the bill has it. Curriculum resources for teachers are an important part of a better outcome. That's why this bill has it. Attendance and participation are important parts of developing a student and giving them the tools to succeed in the future. That is why this bill has that.

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I hope that the Leader of the Opposition will support our teachers by supporting this bill, because that's—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the Leader of the Opposition.

Ms. Marit Stiles: You know what helps teachers to manage classrooms? Smaller class sizes—right?—fewer students and more educational assistants to support those kids that are struggling—that's what helps in managing a classroom. This minister is doing the opposite. He is firing teachers. He is firing educational workers, the caring adults who help our kids succeed.

I want to tell you, kids and parents in our schools right now don't know who's going to be teaching their kid next week, let alone next September. That's a reality. What students need to improve outcomes is smaller class sizes, but the minister doesn't seem to care about that.

So Speaker, my question is very simple, to the Premier: Why do he and his minister continue to ignore what is best for our children?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, actually, that's completely wrong, Madam Speaker, because under this government, we've seen literacy rates, the scores in literacy—reading and writing—at their highest level ever recorded. We are seeing graduation rates—highest level ever recorded. We're seeing math scores finally starting to increase, albeit, in agreement with teachers, not fast enough. That's why we're doubling down on some of the supports. After 15 years of a very challenging system under the Liberals, we're plowing resources back into the classroom. We're listening to our teachers, who are telling us that they need help managing their classroom. This bill does that.

But more importantly, we're investing in students. We're ending the constant fighting that puts teachers in the middle of disagreements between boards and parents. We're focused on student achievement. That's what this bill is about. That's what we have been about since 2018, and we'll continue to double down to support parents, students and teachers so that we can have the best outcome for our students.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the Leader of the Opposition.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Speaker, I give the minister an A for creativity but an F for effort, I've got to tell you.

Nothing in that legislation is actually about outcomes for students. It is simply another way for this government to centralize power and to hand out some pretty plum assignments: \$500,000-plus, I would say, CEO appointments to their failed Conservative candidates and insiders and, at the same time, firing, again, another thousand education workers, a thousand teachers.

It is simple, right? If you hire more teachers, you have smaller class sizes. If you hire more educational assistants, you have more support for our children.

We have seen what happens already when this government centralizes power in the ministers' offices. We get the greenbelt grab. We get the Skills Development Fund disaster. We get a sketchy luxury spa in downtown Toronto. What we don't get is results for the people of Ontario.

Back to the Premier: Is this just another way for this government to help out some insiders while our kids fall behind?

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Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, the challenge is, Madam Speaker, that if you don't read the bill, you don't know what's within the bill, right?

I just heard the Leader of the Opposition say we're going to give out \$500,000 jobs. Well, the reality is, we're hiring a CEO to run the management of our school boards, whose budgets in some instances rival those of provinces. Imagine that: We want to have somebody who understands management, somebody who understands financing and somebody who understands capital and human resources leading an organization like that. But do you know who will be making the decision on hiring that person? Elected trustees, not the Premier, not the Minister of Education—elected trustees will make that decision, Madam Speaker.

Education and academic achievement: Where will that be put in? In the hands of a qualified educator.

This is about moving the system forward. This is about putting students, parents and teachers forward. It is about refocusing boards on what they're supposed to be focused on, student achievement, while ending the constant fight between school boards and parents that puts teachers in the middle all of the time.

Education funding

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Arizona is a junior kindergarten student with autism and multiple disabilities. Last year, one-on-one support at daycare allowed her to stay all day. But this year, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board and its government-appointed supervisor gave her only 25% EA support. So Arizona hasn't been able to attend school full-time, which means her parents have been unable to work full-time. As a result, they lost their home. Arizona is now living in a shelter, along with her mom and dad.

How can the Premier justify failing kids like Arizona so badly?

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

Hon. Paul Calandra: Obviously, I'm unaware of Arizona's specific situation, but I'm sure the member will agree that the significant portion of all the reforms that we're doing are about just that: plowing more money back into the classroom, eliminating some of the waste and duplication, especially in the Ottawa-Carleton board.

Let's be honest, Madam Speaker: The Ottawa-Carleton board, before the ministry assumed responsibility with a supervisor, was a complete mess—the infighting that was happening between the trustees, who were spending more money fighting with themselves than they were on important programs like the member talks about.

There is a lot of work that has to be done to bring that budget back into a sense of reality. The supervisor is working very hard. They have put a student-first model in place. They are reviewing every single budget item with one singular focus: to plow more money back into the classroom, to eliminate waste and duplication, to stop the infighting that was happening between trustees and to ensure that students, parents and teachers have what they need to ensure the best possible outcomes.

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

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Ms. Chandra Pasma: That \$400,000 that the minister is giving to his supervisor could have gone to give EAs to Arizona and dozens of kids like her. There is nothing in Bill 101 that provides the funding that would allow kids like Arizona to be at school all day and nothing in the budget. Neither one of them even mentions special education.

Every day in Ontario, there are thousands of kids at home who should be at school but are not because of this government's funding cuts—thousands of kids whose parents are struggling financially, thousands of kids missing out on their right to an education. A power grab by the minister doesn't help them. So why is the Premier doing that instead of properly funding education?

Hon. Paul Calandra: In fact, the \$101,000 that I pay the supervisor is significantly less than the \$1.5 million I was paying the trustees in that area. It is significantly less than the millions of dollars they were spending fighting each other as opposed to looking at what our students, parents and teachers needed in that system.

Now, I know it hurts the opposition. It hurts the opposition because when the school system is focused on students, parents and teachers, when it's focused on student outcomes, it's not good news for the opposition, right? It's not good news because what they thrive on is chaos. They had the opportunity to do what we are doing: focus on students, focus on teachers, end the conflict between school boards and parents that puts teachers in the middle and hurts our kids.

I will not apologize. We will not apologize for once again having the Ministry of Education lead academic achievement in the province of Ontario by working with our partners to focus on what they need. I won't apologize for it. We won't apologize for it. We know it's working because the results show that it is.

Autism treatment

Ms. Laura Smith: My question is for the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services. Raising a child with autism is a profound responsibility. Children and families need stability, assistance and access to support.

Our government has committed to assisting families by expanding funding to the Ontario Autism Program, and we're working to ensure that children receive timely supports that help them reach their full potential. Speaker, can the minister please outline how our government is supporting children with autism and their families and what steps are being taken to ensure more children receive the care they need through the Ontario Autism Program?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member from Carleton.

MPP George Darouze: Thank you to the great member from Thornhill for the important question.

Speaker, our government is laser-focused on helping families and ensuring that children with autism get the support that they need, including in my riding of Carleton. That's why we are continuing to make record investments to support the health and safety of children and youth across the province, including an additional \$186 million in the Ontario Autism Program through this year's budget, bringing our total investment to nearly \$1 billion, an increase of nearly \$674

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million, or 232%, since 2018—only under this government, under the leadership of Doug Ford and Minister Parsa.

But Speaker, this isn't about the numbers; this is about the life experience of these children and their families. This program was built by the community for the community, shaped by the people with lived experience, family members, clinicians and experts, and we will continue to listen to ensure no child is left behind.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Just a reminder: We do not reference members by first or last name.

Back to the member for Thornhill.

Ms. Laura Smith: Thank you to the parliamentary assistant for his response and the great work he does within his portfolio.

Speaker, this increase represents real hope for families who have been waiting for essential therapies. By investing in the Ontario Autism Program, we can help families with autism reach their full potential and support families in a meaningful way.

I'm hearing from members of my community about the challenges that they face and the differences that additional resources can make in their daily lives. Through you, Speaker, can the parliamentary assistant please explain how our government's recent funding will better support children with autism and their families across Ontario?

MPP George Darouze: Our government has created a world-leading autism program that was built by the community for the community. All families who are registered into the OAP have immediate access to multiple services, including foundational family services, urgent response services when needed, caregiver-mediated early year programs and the entry to school program.

Under our government, the number of children in core clinical services has tripled, and we expanded core clinical services to include ABA, mental health services, occupational therapy and speech language pathology. We are enrolling new families every day so that they and their children get the help they need in Ontario. Over 24,000 children are enrolled in core clinical services, which has grown from 8,000 since 2022.

Speaker, we are extremely proud of these improvements, and we are delivering a program that will serve more children and youth than ever before in the history of Ontario.

Putting Student Achievement First Act, 2026

Resuming the debate adjourned on April 15, 2026, on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 101, An Act to amend various Acts in respect of education and child care

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): I'll give the members a moment to leave so I can start the debate.

Further debate? The member for Markham–Unionville.

Mr. Billy Pang: Speaker, I'm pleased to rise today to speak to Bill 101—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): We're out of rotation and I'm asking for further debate. I recognize the member for University–Rosedale.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I rise today to speak about the government's latest bill to so-call improve education. After I read it, I can safely say that this bill is not going to improve student learning. It is not going to improve student outcomes. It's not going to address the mental health crisis that we are seeing in our elementary schools, our middle schools and our high schools. It is not going to improve special education. And it is not going to lower class sizes.

I want to talk to you a little bit about what this bill does do. This bill vastly expands the amount of power the Minister of Education has over school boards and our school systems. It gives the minister the power to approve a school board's budget, to override decisions made by school boards, to decide how grades are calculated, to decide what books and resources in the classroom can be used—which is really quite an overreach, if you ask me. It makes me wonder: What kind of books is the Minister of Education looking at banning? Are we going to see a ban of George Orwell's 1984—which would be ironic, I've got to say. It's pretty concerning.

We're also seeing in this bill that the power of school board trustees to set budgets has been removed and it will be given to staff. And what that essentially means is that school board trustees will just be a hollow shell of what they should be and could be and were.

School board trustees are democratically elected advocates for parents, teachers and students so that they can shape the direction of our public school system. They are going to do—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): I am just going to ask the member to stop for a second.

I will now move on to questions to the member for Cambridge.

Mr. Matthew Rae: My question to the member for Cambridge is: From his remarks earlier today on a very important piece of legislation about how this legislation will help us actually get more schools built across Ontario. I know in one of the northern boards in Parry Sound–Muskoka a school was actually half finished and the Minister of Education had to step in and take over that board to implement, obviously, those changes and ensure we get more schools built.

Can the member from Cambridge explain to this place how this bill will help us get more schools built across Ontario and ensure that we're getting the great value for the taxpayers' dollar?

Mr. Brian Riddell: Thank you for the question.

Capital projects at school boards are some of the largest investments we make—tens of millions of taxpayer dollars at a time—and when we go wrong, it's students who pay the price.

Looking no further than Near North District School Board where the school construction project in Parry Sound was so badly mismanaged, students had to attend a school that was half demolished.

The whole point behind this is that this will be able to make it so that we can build more schools in the proper places, educate more students and get them jobs that are important to our economy and the people of Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Jessica Bell: I find it hard to believe that the member opposite is talking about how this bill is going to make it easier to build more schools when, in the budget, this government is looking at cutting up to \$900 million from the education ministry over the next two years. So how do you reconcile that? How are you going to build more schools if you're looking at cutting that massive amount of money from education?

Mr. Brian Riddell: Thank you for the question. It's all about balance. When we look at the whole economy of what we're doing with school boards, how we're going to manage them and how we're going to do the construction, it's going to be a balance: where we put the money and how we go about doing it. That's the plan.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Laura Smith: I thank the member for his remarks earlier.

I was talking about being a parent and having a child in post-secondary—and specifically in high school where accountability is so important. We've got kids who are not showing up to class, and there are no ramifications. This will actually provide for students—that showing up for success be a priority, and this legislation makes attendance part of students' marks, an idea that, as you mentioned, came from a teacher. I'm just wondering what his thoughts are on that, supporting our students and teachers by making participation in class an obvious thing in supporting this bill.

Mr. Brian Riddell: I would like to thank the member from Thornhill for that question.

Bill 101 recognizes and shows that participating is a large part of learning. It's a part of life, not socially, but also educationally, which is the most important part.

Under this bill, attendance and participation will count for 15% of the final mark in grade 9 and 10, 10% in grade 11 and 12. Students with excused absences for illness, holy days or any legitimate reasons are fully protected.

Participation is more than just showing up. It's about paying attention, raising your hand and asking questions to expand your learning, exactly with the habits that prepare student for post-secondary education and the workplace. Instead of just talking about chronic absenteeism, this government is acting to address it.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: This bill is really insulting to the parents and the students of the province of Ontario who need more support in classrooms. This is a government that's cutting up to \$900 million from the education budget and blaming it on others.

This will give the minister the power over schools and boards, including books, grades, exams, school budgets, and land acquisition and building projects. There's no evidence put forward as to why this is needed. School boards are struggling to try to balance budgets with all of these cuts—and without any clear evidence.

My question to you and the question of everyone in Ontario: Is this about the real estate portfolio of school boards all across Ontario?

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Mr. Brian Riddell: Thank you for the question.

What I said earlier: It's more about the balance. We found all sorts of extravagant spending that shouldn't have been done by school boards. We've had to take over school boards. It's more about putting the money towards the students and their education, and proving that out with them.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): I recognize the member from Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound.

MPP Paul Vickers: Ontario needs more qualified teachers in our classrooms, and aspiring teachers need a path into the profession that respects their time and their wallet. Right now, teacher candidates spend two full years and four semesters earning their bachelor of education, a length introduced by the previous Wynne government, largely to manage an oversupply of teachers that no longer exists.

Can the member explain how shortening the bachelor of education to a consecutive 12-month program, while quadrupling the associate teachers' honorarium to \$635, will help get more well-prepared teachers into Ontario classrooms sooner and at a lower cost to the candidates themselves?

Mr. Brian Riddell: Thank you for the question. Teachers are the lifeblood of Ontario's education system, and our government is committed to giving them the supports they need to succeed in the classroom from day one.

That's why we're modernizing the teacher education program, saving aspiring teachers up to \$3,000 in tuition costs and fees and reducing the time needed to launch a successful teaching career. The classroom practicum—the hands-on learning that prepares teachers for real classrooms—is being maintained and we are quadrupling the associate teachers' honorarium to \$635, to expand and strengthen placement opportunities.

These changes deliver our commitments that all major parties have campaigned on, and they ensure Ontario continues to have a stable, high-quality teacher workforce for the years to come.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Yes, I'm wondering about keeping kids in school and so on. My nephew chronically doesn't go to school, because there's nobody there. There are so many kids in the classroom that he can't get the support he needs to encourage him to be there.

So my question is: Why is the government not putting the money into having more responsible adults in the school, so that every single one of our students can be supported? Because that's not what you're doing.

Mr. Brian Riddell: Well, to be honest—and I respect your question—I don't know why your grandson is not attending school.

When I went to school, it was a privilege and I enjoyed it—not only just the social, but the educational part of it too. And I think with the reorganization of how we're doing this, bringing the teachers in and working with the students, how can you do it if you're not in attendance?

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I want to thank the member from Cambridge for his comments. I have a question for him: I know we had supervision down in our neck of the woods, years ago. The former director of education in the Windsor-Essex Catholic board, Paul Picard, mentioned that when it comes to trustee dysfunction, it actually does impact on education. He says, “You’re wasting a whole lot of time spinning your wheels in the mud trying to get things done because these interpersonal conflicts just seem to dominate and stop the progress on building new schools and bringing in new services.”

I’m wondering if the member might be able to shed some light on how Bill 101 helps to address this concern with the trustees not getting things accomplished.

Mr. Brian Riddell: I would like to thank the member for that question. I think it’s about discourse in the trustees and what they’re doing. I think there was a lot of in-fighting in a lot of these boards. The larger the board, there seemed to be more in-fighting. I think what this does is focus the trustees on what they should be paying attention to, and that’s working for the students and working to get the education they need for the future.

I think bringing in a CEO to manage and work with them and organize them is an excellent idea. I think it will be great for the future.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Further debate? I recognize the member for University–Rosedale.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you so much, Speaker. It feels like Groundhog Day.

The Conservative government has introduced another education bill. I’ve looked through it—we’ve looked through it—and it is safe to say that on the key measurables by which we define school success and student success, this government is just not going to improve much at all. It’s not going to improve student learning outcomes, it is not going to address the mental health crisis that’s in schools, it’s not going to improve the very serious issues we’re seeing in congregate settings and special education, and it’s certainly not going to lower class sizes, which is what experts are telling us is what is needed to improve our public school system and lift learning outcomes.

I want to summarize what this bill does. This bill significantly expands the amount of power that the Minister of Education has over school boards and our school system, and that is very alarming. The minister has given himself the power to approve a school board’s budget, to decide how grades are calculated, to decide what books and resources in the classroom can be used—honestly, you can’t make this stuff up.

The government has also given themselves the power of having much more say over what school board trustees can and cannot do. They have essentially gutted school board trustees’ responsibilities and made them so that they’re essentially advocates but that they can no longer make decisions. I have a lot of concerns about this, because the value of school board trustees is that they are democratically elected, they are accountable to parents, they’re accountable to the electorate, and they get to advocate and also shape the direction of the public school system. It’s very concerning.

What I also find quite alarming is that the government is choosing to eliminate the number of Toronto District School Board trustees from 22 to 12—once again, just before an election is about to begin—and they have reduced their honorarium to about \$10,000 a year. Who is going

to run? Who's going to run as a school board trustee when you are responsible for up to 60 schools, you do not have the power to solve the problems that parents are approaching you with and you're being paid \$10,000 a year to work upwards of 30 to 40 hours a week? That's how much our trustees work in our area. They have two wards; it is a significant job. Who is going to run?

What is so disturbing is that the minister also has an answer for that: If trustees do not run, the Minister of Education can just appoint someone—great. What that means is that we might be getting some failed Conservative party candidates being appointed to influence our school board decisions. It's pretty concerning.

What I also find a little alarming about this bill is that these changes only apply to English-language boards—Catholic and English-language—but they do not apply to the French school board system. Why target the English-language school board system? It's a genuine question. Why do that? It's the same school board system. Why do that? It's very concerning.

The reason why I have a lot of issues with this bill is because the government likes to say, "Oh, we're introducing this bill because we want to address the financial mismanagement and the abuse that is happening in our school board system," but it's not going to do that. If this government is serious about addressing some of the abuse and financial mismanagement that we're seeing in Ontario, I encourage this government to look in the mirror, because there are many things that this government is doing which I have a lot of questions about, which the public has a lot of questions about, like spending \$2.5 billion on the sketchy Skills Development Fund, where money is going to entertainment clubs—and I'm using a euphemistic term there. It's going to family doctors. It's going to the Minister of Labour's wife's company, who she was lobbying for. We've got a lot of questions about that, with that money being channelled out. Yet at the same time, we do not have enough money for more teachers and educational assistants to be placed in classrooms so that our kids can reach their full potential.

They have really terrible priorities. I think about Ontario Place, how this government has decided to give a contract to a foreign company whose financial statements show that this company basically didn't have enough money in the bank to be able to afford to buy a condo in downtown Toronto. And you're giving this company carte blanche to prime real estate to build a luxury spa that—I have never in my entire eight years as an MPP had someone say to me at the door, "We desperately need a really big expensive mega spa down at Ontario Place, because I'm lacking spas in my life." I'm just not hearing that. I hear family doctors. I hear nurse shortages. I hear a need for educational assistants and teachers. I hear calls for municipalities to get more investment from the provincial government so potholes can be addressed, daycares can be built, essential services can be improved and maintained. That's what I hear at the door. I do not hear anything about mega spas.

Then what we've also seen in this latest budget announcement—if we're talking about financial mismanagement—is this government is on track to be over \$500 billion in debt in just 18 months. Wow. If we're looking at addressing financial mismanagement, once again, I encourage this government to look in the mirror.

And what I also find very concerning about this government's move with Bill 101 is that it is one of many examples we've seen with this government where they're engaging in what is called democratic backsliding. They are not treating democracy with the respect that we expect, and

they continue to pass legislation that consolidates power in the hands of the Premier and cabinet, and that is very concerning.

I want to give a few examples here. This government has, in the last legislative session, rammed through far-reaching omnibus bills without taking them to committee hearings. And it remains to be seen if the government is going to be taking significant bills, including the budget bill, to committee in this legislative session. We're waiting to see. People have things to say about that.

We've got issues with the special economic zones, where the government has given themselves the power to draw a line on a map and just decide that that whole area is exempt from environmental protection and workplace rules. It's incredibly undemocratic, and that's why that law is now being taken to court once again.

We just saw a bill that was just introduced where the government is looking at making it so that they can appoint officials who will have taxation power and direct an entire level of government. That is taxation without representation. How can it be that an individual who has the power to decide tax rates is not accountable to the public? That is against Conservative values, and yet you're bringing it in. It is very unusual.

And then we've just seen in this legislative session, in the budget bill, that the government is gutting the FOI process—the freedom-of-information process so that the public can access information/government records that affect them; this government is making it much harder for them to do that. It's very troubling. This growing list reveals a very, very troubling disregard of democratic principles that are fundamental to Canada.

What we are seeing with this bill, at the same time, is a move to make it much harder for school board trustees to actually do their job and democratically oversee our school boards. It is parents, it is teachers and it is the quality of our education system that will pay the price as a result of that decision.

What I find most frustrating of all is that when I visit schools—at the start of every school year, I go to all my schools. I introduce myself to the principal. I say hi to the administrator. I reach out to the parent council and I find out what's going on in the school. I have about 33 schools in my riding. It takes me about two days to do it. From that point on, I often get parents and teachers regularly contacting me and telling me what's happening in the school.

What I have heard over the last six months about what's happening in schools is pretty concerning. I have heard about kids being denied access to school. I had a parent recently approach me whose kid is autistic and non-verbal, who was recently told by the principal at her local school that there is no longer a place for that child because they do not have enough educational assistants in the school to provide the care that is needed to keep their kid safe and to ensure that the classroom can be properly run so that learning can happen. Now that parent is at a loss about what to do. Typically, you would call the school board trustee to deal with that issue, but now there's no school board trustee who is available to do that.

I hear from principals about the mental health crises that are taking place within the classroom and also on the playground and also issues with behaviour—a rise in bullying, a rise in violence. Kids are still recovering from the pandemic. Kids who were four and five during the pandemic are in grades 5 and 6 now, and those behaviour issues remain. I'm hearing that from principals.

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I've heard about special education and how this government is looking at increasing class sizes. The Conservative-government-appointed supervisor has made the decision to increase class sizes for special education in congregate settings. What that means, in layperson's terms, is that schools like Beverley, Lucy McCormick and Heydon Park are seeing class sizes increase. It means that children who are very vulnerable—kids on the spectrum, children who have not been able to survive in any meaningful way and get any kind of meaningful education outcomes in a mainstream school, kids who are medically fragile, kids with Down's—are in a larger class size, and the parents are very worried about this. They're like, "These schools are a lifeline for my kid, and what does that mean for my kid's education when we're already struggling?"

We're also seeing instances where class sizes across the board are looking at being increased come September. The Conservative government's supervisor has decided that no longer will there be class caps for grades 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8—no class caps at all. It's just been lifted. We're already seeing issues right now with very large class sizes in that cohort, very large class sizes—above 30. What this does is, this just opens the door to ultra-large class sizes come September. And you know in that kind of situation it's going to be louder, there are going to be more behavioural issues, kids are going to have more difficulty in concentrating, and it will be harder for them to complete course work in the classroom. It means learning outcomes will decline. That is the inevitable result of putting more kids into a classroom. Every expert tells us that. But that's the direction that we're heading.

Also, I've just recently spoken to some parents and some teachers at some of the middle schools. I asked them about textbooks and books, and one of the parents actually laughed at me. She said, "There's no textbooks there. There's no money for new textbooks in public schools right now." It's very concerning.

The reason I bring up some of the examples of what I've heard in the last six months is because there's literally nothing in this bill that is going to address the very real issues that parents are telling me about, that teachers are dealing with in the classroom and that students are experiencing. There's nothing there. It's very serious governance changes to the detriment of democracy and that's essentially what it is.

At the same time as we are debating this bill, we are also debating the budget bill. We have been combing through the budget numbers. I'm very interested in what we're seeing with education, and what we are seeing with education is that we're looking at cuts. We're looking at cuts next year and the year after that. Based on our calculations, we expect up to \$900 million is going to be cut from the education budget over the next two years. What that means is that all the issues that you're hearing about, I'm sure, from your parents and the issues that we're hearing about from our parents are going to go from bad to worse: bigger class sizes, more issues with special education, teacher layoffs—we're already seeing 600 in the TDSB. I know some of them will be hired back, but a lot of them will not be hired back. These are huge concerns. This bill isn't going to fix them.

I encourage this government to look seriously at what is happening in our public schools and recommit to the very important goal that the provincial government should have, which is to invest in our public schools. It helps us in the long-term. It helps our kids now.

That's all I'm going to have to say about this bill right now. I urge you to reconsider it. Get back to the drawing board. Invest in our schools. That's what our kids are asking for, not this mess.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Catherine Fife: The member from University–Rosedale has made some very salient points to the members opposite. Every government comes into power, tries to redefine education. They try to hold it up and say, “We have this new vision for education.” What this government has done thus far in education: You have brought in a snitch line against teachers, used the “notwithstanding” clause to override collective bargaining rights and interfere and highlight the tension in the system, and now you’re using attendance.

Attendance is important. However, what the legislation does not understand is why students sometimes don’t attend. If the schools are under-resourced, then students cannot attend.

Would the member from University–Rosedale please highlight the importance of understanding the issue around attendance and why having a punitive solution to it is not the answer?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for that. I also want to emphasize that everyone here understands that attendance is important. What is also important is ensuring that there is a qualified teacher at the front of the classroom who has got a holistic curriculum to teach students, that there are additional mental health supports, educational assistants and things like that to help kids that are struggling.

I can’t emphasize enough the value of having vice-principals and principals available to work with parents and students who might be struggling in school and who might have some very good reasons why they cannot attend school. Maybe they are being bullied in the playground or in the stairwells, where there are no teachers watching. Maybe they’ve got some very serious learning challenges which are making going to school very difficult.

In that case, punishment is not the solution; it’s diagnostics and additional support. I think that’s a far better approach.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: From my understanding, school boards don’t get enough to pay the cost of CPP that they have to pay. They just aren’t given that money from the government.

My question is for the member from University–Rosedale. How do school boards end up reconciling that difference in funding for a cost that they have no choice but to pay and they are not given any money for?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for that question. The Minister of Education talks on and on and on about how he’s taking over school boards because of financial mismanagement. But what the Minister of Education never says is that school boards are struggling financially because this provincial government fails to properly fund schools. The school boards are often in this very difficult situation where they are legally obligated to provide services and programs and pay for measures like CPP and wages, yet they have very little ability to influence what those programs and services are. It is the federal government that decides CPP; it is not a school board.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Laura Smith: Through you, Speaker: I want to begin by saying that teachers are some of the finest residents, finest citizens that I have ever known. They are my friends; they are my neighbours. What they put into the classrooms is outstanding. I do know this.

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And I've spoken to my friends who are teachers. Sometimes they spend hours—especially the newer teachers—of their personal time scouring the Internet, even TikTok, even paying another teacher to find basic classroom materials because the system has failed to give them the reliable foundations to work from.

This bill extends this Trillium List approach for textbooks to digital and classroom resources, giving teachers high-quality, ministry-approved bases to start from while preserving their professional flexibility to support their own materials.

Does the member opposite believe that Ontario teachers should be kept building their own lesson plans on TikTok instead of being from a trusted, vetted source of resources that the government is finally giving them?

Ms. Jessica Bell: That is a really interesting question. It's hard to take lessons from a government that created these issues in the first place. It is astonishing that the government thinks giving teachers a \$750 credit card to buy toilet paper and tissue paper and printing paper is going to solve the chronic financial issues that school boards face.

What I urge this government to do is look at its track record of funding school boards. This government has already cut \$6.3 billion from the school system and is looking at cutting another \$900 million in the next two years. A \$750 credit card is not going to make up the difference.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: To the member from University–Rosedale: We know that there are 45,000 teachers who have actually gone through training, who are members of the Ontario College of Teachers, and have left the profession. Yet now we have a government that's saying, "Well, we've got a shortage of teachers, so we're going to shorten the study period," which may or may not work but is certainly going to create chaos in schools of education, I can tell you that.

Can you speak to the fact that teachers are leaving the profession and why that is happening?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you very much for that question. We are very concerned about the difficulty our schools are facing in keeping the teachers that they currently have. We hear from teachers who have issues with violence in the classroom. Many of them are suffering from burnout and overwork, and they're looking elsewhere because the profession is not sustainable for them.

The other issue that we're seeing is that this government is cutting school board budgets, and it's resulting in teachers and educational assistants and support staff being laid off. In the TDSB right now, we have just seen the announcement that up to 600 teachers are looking at being laid off over the summer. That's not going to improve school outcomes. That's not going to lead to smaller class sizes. It's going to create chaos in the classroom, and no one wants that.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

MPP Bill Rosenberg: I want to thank all the teachers out there. I know they do a great job. My daughter is a teacher; my son-in-law is a teacher. I loved my teachers; not all of them loved me.

I want to ask the member: At the York Catholic District School Board, trustees burned through seven different directors of education in just nine years—hiring and firing senior leadership at will, holding board operations hostage to political games. Bill 101 ends that revolving door by

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requiring ministerial approval before a CEO can get terminated, ensuring qualified professionals, not warring trustees, lead the day-by-day operations of multi-billion-dollar organizations responsible for educating our children.

Why does the member opposite want to preserve this system where trustees can fire seven leaders in nine years and call it good governance?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Everyone here wants to see school boards well managed, with the budgets that they need to provide high-quality education to kids. Everyone here wants to see that. The solution is not to take away school board trustees' power and replace them with a Conservative-government-supervised appointee who earns \$350,000 a year, and who has no direct educational experience in the classroom. That is not the solution.

We're already seeing the impacts of this. We're seeing schools that are slated to be closed. We're seeing increases in class sizes. We're seeing special education class sizes being increased. And all these decisions are being made by this individual who was completely unaccountable to the public. You can't even get this guy to respond to an email, even if it's a serious issue at a school. That's not the answer. It really isn't.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Very quickly—I recognize the member for Nickel Belt.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Very quickly. So the bill allows—the minister will need to approve any acquired land by a school board. Given their behaviour, are you worried?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for that excellent question. University–Rosedale has some of the most expensive land in the country. We are already seeing moves by the Conservative government to rezone schools so they can be sold off to a developer and a 40-storey condo is built on that land. We're also hearing of schools being told they can no longer bring in—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): I recognize the member for Etobicoke–Lakeshore.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you, Speaker, for the opportunity to be here to debate the Putting Student Achievement First Act, 2026.

I'm going to pause there first, on the title. It's an interesting name for the bill, particularly a bill that has very little in it that will help to do that, Speaker. Putting student achievement first: an aspiration that any parent would have for their kids in our schools, to be able to get the education they need to set them up well for life; to learn the foundational knowledge in English, French, science, math, the arts and every important subject that they learn; to develop as great humans, with social, creative and team skills, and to discover and see the talents they may have in the arts, music and sport; to gain confidence in that, to know that feeling comes from taking pride in their work and who they are as young people; to give them strong foundations to thrive as children, but also well into their future and in their lives. And in doing that, it will also deliver the promise of a strong democratic society, one where citizens contribute to its economic prosperity, but also its social fabric.

Aren't these the reasons we care about public education in this province? We care about it for our kids to set them up for success. We also care because in this province, we believe that the ability to develop these skills, develop as people, should be available to all kids, regardless of

your parents' income or where you live in the province. That is the kind of education I believe in, and I know it's the kind of education our caucus believes in.

All I want is for a government that will wake up each day and think, "How can we build an education system that will be the very best for our kids, one that respects teachers who we entrust to teach and support our kids' development?"

I hoped for a bill that would reduce class sizes, support students with developmental and unique needs, build a plan to proactively address students' mental health, support and respect teachers in their work and reduce violence, and inspire kids to learn.

But that is not what we see here at all. After months of harmful rhetoric from this Premier, we see a bill that is a power grab again. It centralizes power over schools with the minister himself. The bill creates school CEOs that report to him and can only be changed at his direction—nothing about class sizes or special education; nothing about mental health; increasing police presence in classrooms and a whole lot about buying and selling school lands however the Ford Conservatives please.

Students and teachers are not political chess pawns. We must do so much better than this. That is why we are hearing from organizations, unions, parents expressing their disagreement with this bill. They want local leaders to be empowered. They're tired, actually, of this government's obsession with centralizing in Toronto; obsession with power and the money grab; the power to decide what our kids learn; the power to hand-pick these new CEOs. For example, Heather Watt is a long-time Conservative staffer, not an educator, and has been installed to run a school board. These Ford appointees are deciding what to pay themselves and taking decisions about education away from parents, local citizens and teachers.

The power to decide on building contracts: They will even decide which contractors are hired, how windows are changed, what supplies are purchased. Who will the Conservatives hire? Their friends?

The power to control school lands: They have given themselves extraordinary powers to expropriate, close and sell off schools. Public schools are not for sale. And, given what we've seen on the greenbelt and other decisions—decisions that they're now hiding from with the new FOI laws—I am not sure we should put our trust, unchecked, into this centralized approach.

The power to override any decision: Yes, they are keeping trustees but in a much-diminished capacity. And that is what they've done. They've pulled it away from local leadership and put it in their own hands. But on the issues that people want addressed, the bill fails. It does nothing to help students and teachers. It utterly fails to address what really matters, which is education outcomes.

They removed requirements for the climate survey, the one means we had to systematically understand the experience of students and families with their schools. Once again, we see, "Remove the measurement, so that you don't need to act on it." It reminds me of hallway health care actually. "Let's just stop reporting on it."

The situation in our public schools is bad, and this bill will make it worse. According to People for Education, class sizes have never been bigger. A report came out that only 40% of students are regularly attending high school. Whose fault is that? And what will this do to help students achieve and get test scores up? How will it provide the special support some kids need to

succeed? And why don't they respect teachers to make decisions about teaching and learning? I trust teachers any day more than the Conservatives to make those decisions.

John McGrath, in his article for TVO this week, wrote: "People on the right and left who dream of more radical changes to education won't find it in Bill 101, because that's not what the government wants. Queen's Park mostly wants education policy to be quiet and stay quiet while the Premier focuses on other priorities, and viewed through that lens the bill looks like it could very well achieve its aims. Whether that satisfies voters, particularly parents with children in Ontario's schools, is just one more unanswered question."

This article did resonate for me and, from what I hear, for constituents. My sons are both teenagers now. One has moved on to post-secondary education; the other is still in high school. In fact, they were part of the first classes of all-day kindergarten: a policy change that has now been studied and has delivered strong academic, social and economic results. But it means that our family and those of their friends and my neighbours have also had a front-row seat for what these last eight long years of Conservative governments have meant for our kids: the change that has occurred, the decline in learning, the increased class sizes—well over 30 kids in most classes—the lack of textbooks, the reduction in extracurricular, as teachers are working to do their best. But they don't feel supported, and some are making the choice to leave.

One thing I heard far too many times during the election in my riding, on people's doorsteps, was this: "We definitely can't afford to send our kids to private school, but our child needs more support than is possible in a class of 30 to 34 kids." And, Speaker, do you know what I told them? "We can't let that happen. We need to fight for the vision of education; the vision of education, the vision for our kids and their future that I started with in this speech.

The Conservative government won't deliver it, but we will continue to fight for it every day.

Needless to say, I will not be supporting this bill.

Oh, and I'm sharing my time with the member from Orléans.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): I recognize the member for Orléans.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Thank you to my colleague from Etobicoke–Lakeshore for leading us off.

Let me begin, Madam Speaker, in a spirit of fairness. There are parts of this bill that point in the right direction: Attendance matters. Participation matters. Financial accountability matters. Parents deserve confidence that school boards are spending public money on students, not on dysfunction, vanity or waste.

Now, the government makes the case clearly, and on that general principle, I do not disagree. But good government is not just about identifying the problem; it is about solving the problem properly. It is about writing rules that are firm without being foolish, consistent without being rigid and accountable without becoming blind to the real lives of students, teachers and families.

And that, Madam Speaker, is where I still have questions, because when we say, "student achievement first," we should mean the whole student, not just a spreadsheet, not just the compliance report, not just the bureaucracy—the student. Yes, their grades and their scores, but what about their mental health? What about their physical health?

Perhaps the most disappointing thing about this bill is that we've been hearing about it for months. For months there have been leaks, hints, trial balloons and talks of major educational reform. Expectations were built. Anticipation was created. We were told to expect a bill that would finally confront the real challenges facing our schools. And yet after all of that, the bill simply does not meet the hype.

After months of preparation, we still don't see a serious plan to reduce screen dependence in the classroom. We still don't see a serious plan to restore standards and consequences. We still do not see a serious plan to put physical fitness back at the centre of school life. We don't see a serious plan to support the different ways that boys and girls learn at school, and we don't see a level of classroom investment that teachers are telling us is needed.

The minister spent months preparing this bill. Perhaps more of those months should have been spent listening to teachers, parents and students and less time preparing for another round of governance changes, centralization and argument, because after all that anticipation, after all the build up, after all the talk, Ontarians had the right to expect more than a bill that tinkers around the edges of a system while leaving some of the biggest challenges in our classroom untouched.

Madam Speaker, I believe students need to be in class. They need to show up, they need to participate, they need to build habits and they need to learn that discipline matters. So I understand why the government wants attendance and participation to be reflected in final marks. The government proposes making attendance and participation worth 15% in grades 9 and 10, and 10% in grades 11 and 12, while saying students would not be negatively affected for absences for illness and for holy days. That's a serious proposal, and it deserves a serious conversation.

But the government must understand that not every absence is disengagement. A high-performing student athlete representing their school, their community, maybe even their province, is not skipping class; they are pursuing excellence. A student visiting university campuses, exploring their future, making life-shaping decisions about where they may study next isn't slacking off; they are preparing. A student participating in a major arts competition, debate championships, apprenticeship experiences or cultural events isn't abandoning school; they are living the very kind of broad, ambitious, disciplined life that education is supposed to encourage.

So if the government is going to tie marks more directly to attendance and participation, then the law and the regulations must leave room for judgment, for discretion and for that student excellence. We should reward commitment; we should not punish aspiration. We should insist on attendance, but we should also recognize achievement beyond the four walls of the classroom. The government should make it crystal clear that legitimate absences for high-performing students will not become casualties of their one-size-fits-all rule.

The second issue is governance and financial management.

On this point, I think most members of the House would agree: School boards exist to educate kids, not to indulge adult drama.

The government points to eight boards being placed under supervision since 2025, with multi-million-dollar deficits, and cases of trustee expense abuse and large legal battles, and so on

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and so forth. It proposes tighter expense limits, smaller boards of trustees in some cases, some stronger budget oversight, and more professionalized leadership structures. Again, the instinct here is understandable. Taxpayers have a right to expect prudence. Parents have a right to expect competence. And teachers have a right to expect that classroom dollars will actually reach classrooms.

I support strong financial management. But accountability must run in more than one direction. It cannot be that Queen's Park blames school boards for every shortfall while ignoring the strain being placed on the system from above.

The FAO has said that over the next three years the Ministry of Education spending would need to grow by 3.2% annually to maintain current service levels, but the government's budget plans for the average over the next few years is only 2.5%. The FAO also said real per-student provincial operating funding for school boards was \$14,504 in 2024-25, the lowest level it has been in 10 years.

So, yes, boards must manage money properly. But let's not pretend that governance reform alone will supply textbooks and pay for EAs, special education supports, classroom supplies, smaller classes, mental health supports, and safe, orderly schools.

If the government is serious about student achievement, then strong governance must be matched by real investment where students actually learn, which is in the classroom.

One of the most important education conversations happening right now, and which is not addressed in this bill, is the overuse of screens in classrooms. Too many students now move from smart phone to Chromebook to smart board to YouTube clip, to digital worksheets, to home screen, to gaming screen, to bedtime screen. And then we wonder why attention is fractured, why reading stamina is weaker, why handwriting is disappearing, why behaviour is harder to manage, why some children seem perpetually overstimulated and under-focused. We can't keep flooding children with more screens, more noise and more distraction and then act surprised when they struggle to concentrate, struggle to read, and struggle to learn.

Madam Speaker, internationally, this debate is finally starting to shift. Sweden has explicitly moved towards a "more reading time and less screen time" model, with strengthened access to textbooks, funded school libraries, and is moving towards mobile-free schools.

Provinces, including here in Ontario, are trying to ban cellphones in school, but there are more screens in a classroom than just our kids' cellphones.

So I would say this to the government: If you're serious about consistency in the classroom and consistency with classroom resources, then don't just create a bigger approved digital warehouse. Make room for the return of paper. Make room for textbooks. Make room for printed workbooks. Make room for handwriting. Make room for classrooms that are not lit all day by glowing screens. Technology, of course, has a role. But technology is a tool. It's not a philosophy. It's not a pedagogy. And it's certainly not a substitute for focused teaching and a serious focus on reading.

Madam Speaker, we also have to have the courage to talk about consequences. Children need support. They also need standards. Students who are not ready should not always be waved through. Students who disrupt learning should not always face endless excuses and no real consequences. Students who harm the learning environment of others should not be allowed to

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hold the whole classroom hostage. Sometimes the compassionate thing to do is intervention. Sometimes the responsible thing is discipline. And sometimes the honest thing is to say, “No, you have not met the standard. We are not going to pass you through. We are going to help you meet that standard.” That may mean stronger behavioural policies. That may mean clearer classroom authority. That may mean restoring the idea—

Interruption.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Can the member remove their phone and maybe put it in your pocket or put it on the floor?

Mr. Stephen Blais: Yes, excuse me.

That may mean stronger behavioural policies. That may mean clearer classroom authority. That may mean restoring the idea that promotion is earned and is not automatic. Because social promotion without mastery is not kindness; it’s actually a deception.

And finally, Madam Speaker, if we’re serious about student achievement, we have to talk about the whole child again. Physical fitness is not an extra. It’s not enrichment. It is not something that we do with time that’s left over.

ParticipACTION’s 2024 report card found that only 39% of children and youth in Canada are getting the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity every day. It gave Canada a D-plus overall for physical activity. That’s not a warning light. That is a red, flashing beacon. We should not accept that. Schools should be places where children move, where they compete, where they build strength, where they learn resilience and develop the confidence in their bodies as well as their minds. Because physical fitness is not separate from academic success; it supports it.

Students who are physically active are more likely to focus in class, more likely to have better mental health, more likely to sleep properly and more likely to succeed. Exercise teaches discipline. It teaches perseverance. It teaches teamwork. It teaches young people how to lose with grace, how to get back up, how to keep going when something is difficult.

And frankly, Speaker, too many children today are spending their days sitting. They sit on the bus to school. They sit in class. They sit in front of a screen. They sit on the bus ride home and they sit in front of another screen all night long at home.

There are some things in this bill that are moving in the right direction. Given the hype, I wish the government would have put more attention and focus on the issues in our classroom that need to be addressed.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Laura Smith: I listened to the member opposite diligently. There were a lot of interesting conversations that happened about attendance and student performance.

He mentioned the possibility or he mentioned a concept that I just want him to elaborate on. You talked about high-performance students possibly getting a pass on attendance. How would that be presented to others that, perhaps, do not land in that high-performance area? I wonder if you could elaborate that point.

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Mr. Stephen Blais: As I understand the government proposal, there is going to be an exemption for sickness and for holy days—those are obviously very appropriate—but some kids miss class because they're representing the school at a sports tournament. Some kids miss class because they're representing Ontario at a national sporting event. Some kids miss class because they play in the OHL and they're away playing hockey, trying to pursue their dreams. That's just the sports side. There's academics, there's arts, there's all sorts of ways kids can be high-performing.

If they are pursuing their dreams, if they are pursuing excellence outside the classroom, that should be taken into account. We're building or trying to build complete people, complete citizens who can pursue their dreams and pursue excellence, and some of that happens outside of the classroom.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you to both members for speaking. I found it very interesting.

My question is to the member from Etobicoke–Lakeshore. So this bill—we talk about this credit card that's going to be given to teachers to buy supplies. That's because the board itself doesn't have enough money to buy supplies in bulk, which is how you would expect it to be done. We have transportation in northern ridings where school kids can't get the bus anymore because they've been excluded, so they're walking along the highway in 40-degree-below weather. The boards no longer have the money to keep up that transportation. And then we have special needs students who are being sent home because the supports—there just aren't enough people in the school.

We see, also, a lot of money being siphoned off for new managers.

Do you see anything hopeful in this bill in terms of the money that will be there to actually support students?

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you so much for the question. My answer is no. I'm very concerned that the bill is not focused on the right set of outcomes that we need. If I reflect on the budget bill that we've been debating as well, I looked closely to see if that \$750 per teacher was net new money that was coming into our schools. It wasn't—it wasn't.

Again, I come back to the support priorities. This is about really looking at the things that are going to help our students to be more successful. To me, I think that the focus of this bill is just not on that at all. If they did really care about it, they'd really look at class sizes, they would really look at what some of the other special supports are needed and make sure that those are there for our kids.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you to both my colleagues for their debates today. I want to turn to the member from Orléans. I kind of think of this as the “look over here” bill. This is an education bill that focuses on a trustee ordering a hamburger on Uber Eats—that is what we're hearing in the media—not about what really contributes to student achievement, as it's titled in the bill. How can they put forward a bill about education that does absolutely nothing for students and class sizes, nothing for students with special needs, nothing about violence? I feel like we're all being gaslit.

My question to the member of Orléans is, what is going on? What is truly behind this bill?

Mr. Stephen Blais: As I said, there was a lot of hype; right? For six months to a year, we heard about this big thing the minister was working on that was going to dramatically change education in Ontario, and it really falls flat. There is a need for some governance reform, of course. We need to ensure money is being spent properly. All of our internal MPP expenses have to go through a filter before they're approved for reimbursement. So, those changes are welcome. But if you're going to ensure that our kids are meeting the needs of the 21st century, you need to invest in the classroom, you need to have more teachers in our schools, you need to have more EA supports in our school, you need to make physical fitness and sport a more important part of our schools. You need to focus on the whole student—mental health, physical health, academic health—so that we're producing the best kids.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: My question is for the member from Etobicoke–Lakeshore. We have a classroom of students here; we're talking about education; this legislation is about education. What do you have to say to them about what you see here today and what you hope to see in the future?

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you so much to the member for the question. I want to start by saying to the students: Probably my favourite part of my job as MPP is when you come here and we get a chance to talk to you, whether it's on the stairs or seeing you in the galleries observing this. Because this work that we're doing is important and it affects your future.

This particular bill is about your schools and about what you deserve to support your development, and the kind of humans that we want you to be to be part of Ontario in the future. Sadly, if you heard my debate earlier, I don't think it's going to achieve that for you, but I would leave you with this: The future is yours. The future is yours to step up and raise your voice as well.

So, through the Speaker to the students, thank you for coming today. We will continue to fight for your education and for your schools.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I want to thank both members for their very thoughtful comments in the last 20 minutes. I have a couple of questions for the member from Orléans. I know close to him one of his boards is the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. We've seen in just the last year about a thousand students, if not more, from that board go to the Catholic board, and that's resulted in a \$12.1-million deficit after the trustees had declared a balance based on their expectation they would be able to retain students. Then, about \$230,000 spent on investigations between the trustees themselves, with one trustee leaving saying the board was "entrenched in internal toxicity." Building on that is the problems with OSTA.

My question for the member opposite is whether he felt that some of the issues that the Ottawa-Carleton board seemed to be going through related to reputation may be remedied by some of the measures in this bill.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Yeah, the Ottawa public board was a disaster, and I told Minister Calandra that he needed to do something about it before he actually took over the board. They are no

longer on the front page for that kind of craziness and vanity, but the supervisor still hasn't balanced the budget.

And Bob Plamondon—smart guy, I worked with him in Ottawa on LRT 2. We figured out how to get that deal done and how to make the finances work—he's a smart guy. He's not going to get that balanced budget because there's not enough money going to the board to balance the budget. You have to give him the money needed to provide the classroom supports that the kids need.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I was an educator when all-day kindergarten was rolled out, and I was very excited to meet Premier Dalton McGuinty at the time. But even though I ran a library where he was going to have a photo op, I was told that I was not allowed to go. He wouldn't even attend school during the day; it was on the weekend. I was happy to go, but wasn't allowed.

In the backdrop, he had a couple of bookcases of Gordon Korman books. He removed books like *Framed*; *Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire*; *Public Enemies*; *Schooled*; *Slacker*—you name it. I mean, it was really distressing and disappointing because Gordon Korman is a famous Canadian author.

But we hear this government talking about this miraculous conversion that they actually care for students and care for educators. I would like to know from the member from Orléans, because we're hearing the same from the Liberal Party: Will the member apologize for Liberals attacking educators with the undemocratic Bill 115, apologize for closing 600 schools and apologize for continuing the Harris-era cuts to education?

Mr. Stephen Blais: I will congratulate Premier McGuinty for bringing in full-day kindergarten.

I will congratulate Premier McGuinty for ensuring that high school kids have to continue past the age of 16.

I will congratulate Premier McGuinty for building schools in Orléans to ensure that our kids have a strong place to learn.

What I won't do, Madam Speaker, is forgive New Democrats for the social contract, for the 12 days off, for the 5% pay cut they forced on teachers. That is the record of the NDP government. The NDP government were in power for five years. They incurred \$62 billion of debt. To that point in Ontario's history, it was over 50% of all the debt.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Further debate?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I'm grateful to rise today to represent the people of Kitchener Centre who put their faith in me to be their voice at the Ontario Legislature.

I'm also here to talk as a former social worker and attendance counsellor with the public board and Catholic board in this province and be a voice for education workers who are missing from this legislation. They need their worries and concerns heard, and they need to see legislation and funding that represents what they see as the future of this education ministry.

I want to thank OECTA Waterloo region, ETFO Waterloo Region, OSSTF 24, French boards, parent councils, residents of Kitchener Centre and ed workers who have come to me, heart in

hand, asking for my support in bringing their voice to this place—and, of course, to my sister, Michaela Kargus, a teacher, advocate and a support person who inspires me every day to make this education ministry better.

People come to my office and they want to know about this legislation and how it will affect them. What will it do to help their kid every day who needs help in school? What is this about? I'll tell you. The Green Party of Ontario wants to be sure that kids have what they need to learn, teachers have what they need to teach and that we provide resources through the budget and legislation that leads to answers to these problems; that kids with autism and learning disabilities, mental health challenges, addictions, poverty will see hope in their future. But that's missing. That's missing because the kids, the teachers and the families are not okay. I don't see their voice in this legislation, so I'm here to share what I think is needed to make sure that going forward, we can address this.

I was an attendance counsellor for 11 years. I told the minister this. I don't think he's talked to a single attendance counsellor in crafting attendance legislation. I do want to thank the government—I don't think anybody's talked about attendance at all, and I saw it as a major concern, especially after COVID: more and more kids reaching that threshold of chronic absenteeism. Most kids, if they miss more than 18 days of school each year, will miss a full year of school by the time they reach grade 8. There are some staggering statistics, and we need to do more to help those kids.

But what I do see is that we haven't talked to people like myself who worked this job day in and day out to address kids' issues that mean they end up missing school. We're not talking to the experts and so we come up with a failed system for kids who've already lost hope. That makes it even harder for them to see themselves succeeding in school.

That 15% means that one more kid feels especially less hopeful about their chance to get that credit in high school. I don't want more and more teenagers to feel hopeless that they won't get the credits they need and that coming back and overcoming adversity is too hard—we need to give these kids hope—and so we end up pushing kids into the private system.

For example, social anxiety is one of the top mental health concerns right now. That is represented in our attendance data. I work with students every day who are having panic attacks in the parking lot. Imagine being punished in your grades because you're having a panic attack in the parking lot. What you need is a small classroom. What you need are caring adults that can help you overcome and cope with social anxiety and make your way back into the school system.

But kids feel cut off. They're missing out on their sleep. They don't have what they need in the community to address these mental health concerns. They feel lost and alone and parents feel frustrated and alone as well. They don't have the help they need in the school system, so many of them turn to the private system, which is a shame—that our beautiful public education system isn't there for them when they need it.

I have big concerns about social media. I call on this government to do better. We see jurisdictions like Quebec banning the use of cellphones in high schools. We see Australia holding tech companies accountable. Our Premier mocked the Toronto school boards when they are taking these media companies to court. Meanwhile, in California, these companies are

seen as guilty of causing mental health concerns and are having to pay millions of dollars to people whose lives have been shattered by the adverse effects of these addictive algorithms.

I'm proud of our school boards taking these mega social media giants to court and to task. I hope that our Premier will do the good thing that he should do and sit down and listen to families, listen to students and listen to educators about the impacts of social media and the Internet on the well-being of our students instead of mocking the efforts they're making to set up guardrails.

We need to talk to experts. We can't make this up off the side of our desk. We agree on the issues; what we don't agree on is the path forward to achieve results. That's because we need evidence-based decision-making.

I'm concerned about the concentration of power. Every time we have legislation that says the word "directive," we should worry. We look down south at people being put in positions of power without proper credentials. I see this Minister of Education as not having proper credentials. He doesn't have a background in education. I don't know if he has a background in business, but schools are not businesses. When we put people in charge who have only business credentials, that don't have the expertise in education, that worries me. We need to be sure that we put people in positions of power to make decisions who have experience, who have education in these fields. Schools are not corporations, and by treating them as such we hurt kids.

I do worry about micromanagement. I see that in this legislation it puts the minister in charge of the curriculum and micromanaging some ways of spending money. I just don't know if he's going to have the time to do it all and so I don't know if that's a good path forward.

What I do see is that we can't fiscally manage our way out of the situation. Two thirds of school boards are in a deficit position. That says to me the formula is broken. I do think the formula is broken. I've worked in schools since COVID. Things have changed, and the formula needs to change with it.

When I look at the ways in which our school boards are struggling financially, I think they need more money for special education.

Right now we only pay for four sick days. But teachers can take up to 11. So if teachers are filled in when they're sick, school boards end up in deficit positions. I know in Grand Erie, for example, they covered all their sick days, but now they're millions and millions of dollars in debt.

They're trying to do the right thing, but they aren't given the financial support to do the right thing because the math just doesn't add up. Often special education teachers are filling in when a teacher is sick. What does that mean? If a special education teacher ends up only being able to teach special education for two days out of the whole month, that means those kids who need special help with math, who need special help with reading, who need special help with their IEP, don't get that help.

I want this government to be honest about those fail-to-fills, because every single fail-to-fill—which means that they weren't able to fill in for that EA, that social worker, that child and youth worker, that teacher who's missing—every time those people are gone, it's the special education teacher or the principal who fills in for that class, and they don't get to do their job and those kids miss out on their special education support. That is happening time and time again.

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So I do think we need to make sure we fund sick days properly. We need to pay CPP. School boards do not have a choice but to pay CPP, so it is up to the ministry to make sure they pay that amount. Otherwise, that has to come from somewhere else, and people can't sell their kidneys and they can't sell more widgets.

Right now, it's a \$6.3-billion cut since 2018, and that is huge. Why? Because we're not considering inflation. So if the government wants us to trust them on managing school boards properly, why can't they talk about inflation? Inflation is a reality in our world. If we don't keep up with inflation, that's a cut. And I haven't seen this government realistically respond and talk about the effects of inflation and how if you spend one more dollar, yes, it's historic, but it doesn't keep up with inflation.

I do agree that there's a problem with infighting of our trustees and there's a problem with spending money on legal bills. I don't see legislation fixing that.

So what I have to say is that I hope that we can start working towards what people are actually asking for. I know families are looking for more caring adults in their schools. Every year, at this time of year, I call it the Hunger Games for support staff. Every school is competing to say their school needs more help than the other school, and maybe they get one EA or maybe they get two EAs that spread all the way across a group of students that can be hundreds and hundreds big, many of whom have IEPs. Sometimes classes have 30% of their students with IEPs, but we have one, maybe two, EAs spread across the whole school. Those EAs need training. They need good pay. Right now, they're burning out as well, because they aren't trained for the complex needs that they're being faced with in the school system.

We talk about violence in schools. Everybody wants to think that that's a secondary school issue. No. We're seeing suicidality, major violence, major issues in our elementary schools. Issues that I used to see in high school—issues of suicidality, issues of violence, issues of addiction—we're seeing it in the grade 4 levels now, the grade 5 levels, at early ages. And elementary schools don't want police in there; they need more caring adults to make sure that those kids have what they need.

We see in kindergarten students showing up without potty training. They're showing up in diapers and we don't have the staff to help students go to the toilet.

And it's affecting brains. Those kids have been raised on screens, and we could do so much in those early years, getting midwives to help new parents understand the impacts of technology on their little kids, because kids are showing up with very different brains to our kindergarten classes.

So I ask this government to create a committee to talk about the changes in our school system since COVID happened. Let's create some tangible, evidence-based solutions on how to address social media. Let's talk about real measurements to decide how many EAs are needed for each school, depending on the complexity of the student population.

And please, I ask the minister to come and talk to me about attendance work. I've done this work for years. I'm very passionate about re-engaging students, helping them find hope, helping them see a path to graduation. And I have to say, punishment is not the answer. I've read a lot about how to help students who are missing from school and need help re-engaging, and I have to tell you: This is not what they recommend. I agree something has to be done, but this is not it.

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So I hope that we can create a promising path forward, so that the 76,000 teachers who are registered but not teaching might want to come back. I want to see a path forward where less families have to turn to the private system to get special education help. And I hope we can find more hope for teachers by listening to them, engaging with them meaningfully. I know that the minister has listened to teachers and talked to teachers, but I think he has to do the same thing not just to identify the problems, but to identify the solutions.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you, Speaker. I want to thank the member from Kitchener Centre for her comments. I was thinking, just on your earlier remarks: Bill Davis, who is widely regarded as one of the finest Ministers of Education that Ontario has ever seen, was actually a lawyer and did not come from an education background, so I am open to the possibility that a Minister of Education can have a background that isn't rooted in education and still be very successful.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Good point.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you.

I was very intrigued by comments on social media. I know a lot of teachers are reliant today on Pinterest, TikTok, Teachers Pay Teachers, just to find basic classroom materials. I know we don't give teachers a strong foundation to work from in terms of source materials. My mom is a teacher; I know she's watching right now. She was always struggling to find materials.

Bill 101 extends the existing Trillium List approach for textbooks to digital. I wanted to better understand from the member opposite if the government's approach on having the list materials available is better than getting them from social—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Response?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I agree that we don't need to reinvent the wheel every time we teach grade 4 or grade 5 or grade 6 or a certain course in high school. My worry is that it will be "thou shalt." A lot of times teachers get curriculum delivered to them: "By the way, you have to teach this." They don't get the training. They don't get the support.

There has to be flexibility. I really appreciate the Teachers Pay Teachers website. People find resources. We can create a cache of resources to help teachers have lessons that are prepared.

I hope that we listen to teachers and provide the flexibility and support. That \$750 would have been great to spend on teachers supporting teachers, for example. If we listen to them, we can find the nuance between, "Here's the curriculum. Teach it the way we say to," and the flexible model. We need to find the in-between.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Catherine Fife: To the member from Kitchener Centre, I'm concerned around schedule 2, the Education Act, and section 5. This schedule removes the minister's responsibility to conduct school climate surveys that assess student experience. We would want to know how students feel about their educational experience. Why this would be optional, I'm not sure.

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I ran for school board trustee in 2003—a \$5,000 honorarium. One of the first things I did was look at the school climate survey. That's where I learned that students who identify as LGBTQ and who are Black did not feel safe in the system. So what did I do as a trustee? We brought in an equity policy for the first time in the Waterloo Region District School Board. We know that when students don't feel safe in the system, they will not learn.

Does the member from Kitchner Centre share the concern that the Minister of Education has now the ability to not listen to students?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I want to thank the member from Waterloo for their service to the community. They were a trailblazer as a trustee, and that legacy lives on today.

I think there are a lot of stories that don't get told. Again, social anxiety is the number-one mental health issue that we face in Ontario. That means they would rather text than talk. If we want answers—you know, we could wait for those kids to tell us all day long what they want to hear. I know my teenage kids don't always tell me what's really going on unless I create a scenario that hopefully brings about some honesty and vulnerability. But that's between me and my kid. How do we expect kids to be honest with teachers and students and other people in the class when they have less time with caring adults because of these cuts?

So I think it's essential that we keep this survey because it really helps kids give feedback in an anonymous way where they feel safe, and that tells the story of what we're missing in the data and what we see in the data that needs to be addressed.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I wanted to ask the member about the communications policies with Bill 101. If the minister doesn't like what a trustee is saying to parents about cuts or class sizes or the violent kid in the class—you name it—they have to go to the minister to talk it out.

What do you make of a trip to Queen's Park to talk to a minister about a local issue? Where they're centralizing power at Queen's Park, you could be dealing with a school, say, in Englehart, six hours away. How does that make sense? How is this in the best interest of students or parents or families? Is this putting student achievement first, taking a trip to Toronto to talk with the minister about problems in a school six hours away? Who's really benefiting from this?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I guess my worry is that just more parents won't get heard. I think the more we muzzle people because they might be critical, they might give feedback that's not appreciated—I mean, with the FOI stuff, it's clear that this government doesn't want anything possible to come out that could paint them in a negative light. They want to be in charge of the message. I think it's micromanaging, and it's not sustainable. So I think there's going to be more and more parents feeling very alone and unheard, and I think it's a push toward privatization.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I appreciate the member from Kitchener Centre's comments and debate and appreciate the fact that the member has been a school social worker prior to going into politics.

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The member talked about the fact that, inflation-adjusted, there has been a \$6.4-billion cut to education. I want to know from the member what effect that has on children and students, given your experience working in classrooms.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I think if you talk to people who work in schools, they will say they used to have eight custodians for a whole high school; now they have one and a half, so the buildings are getting dirty. I had a building in my riding that—the front of it fell off, and now the school is closed. It's disrupted people's lives, teachers' lives. It's caused a lot of stress and strain for the—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Pursuant to standing order 50(c), I am now required to interrupt the proceedings and announce that there have been six and a half hours of debate on the motion for second reading of this bill. This debate will therefore be deemed adjourned unless the government House leader directs the debate to continue.

I recognize the member for Essex.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Please continue the debate.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Continue.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: We're seeing cuts to custodians. We're seeing school boards that are in deficit positions. We see cuts to classrooms where people are managing larger class sizes. Kids just aren't getting the help. I was spread between about five or six schools. I had a caseload of 120 students.

So, in this moment in time, when our kids are having major mental health crises, we're seeing really harmful problems in their well-being, we're making cuts to the things that will help them most, and it's just not sustainable.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Laura Smith: Through you, Speaker: Too many school boards across this province have actually grossly mismanaged projects, capital projects specifically. There's one incident of a student learning—they were literally learning in a half-demolished school, in unfinished buildings or without the facilities that they were promised.

This change is about putting the right people in the right role so that every dollar in our education system works harder for the students and supports stronger outcomes across this province. So it's about students first, and it's about dollar figures—making sure that those students get those dollar figures.

Accountability is important. Will the member support this bill so that there's better accountability across this province, especially when it comes to mismanagement across the school boards?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I understand that no school board is perfect, but we do have a \$16-billion repair backlog. So there are schools that have the very roofing that is the reason why we closed the science centre, but they have that roofing and those schools are open. So, we really do need to invest in our school infrastructure.

When it comes to mismanagement, I just don't think the math adds up. There is that \$6.4-billion cut because of inflation, so costs have gone up, but the budgets haven't met the moment.

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I'll bring it back to sick days and CPP: There's stuff that school boards just have to pay for, like sick days, and the government doesn't make sure that those are fully funded. There's just nowhere else to get that money from. There's nowhere else to get money to pay for CPP. There's nowhere else to get money to get for Bill 124 reparations. So we see cuts to special education, we see larger class sizes and we see delayed infrastructure payments.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I want to thank the member for your passion in this and for your advocacy for kids. That's what we need here: people that see schools as places where we're educating kids, where we are responsible for the future of our kids, not that we need CEOs to manage the fiscal bottom line; we need someone that has the same kind of dedication and passion as you do.

What I want to ask you is, if you could just change one thing about this bill that would speak directly to what kids need, what would that be?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Of course, I want investments in funding, but I'd like to see a recognition of the social media impact and Internet impact on our students. This government is asleep at the wheel. We see jurisdictions across the world begging, borrowing and stealing, doing everything they can to look at the data, look at the research. This problem didn't start yesterday. In fact, smartphones really took off in 2012. We've seen a huge spike in suicidality alone since 2012. Eating disorders—I could go on; I won't.

We know their harms are great, and I would like to see meaningful legislation that puts safeguards in place for our young—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Further debate?

Mr. Billy Pang: Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to speak to Bill 101, the Putting Student Achievement First Act, 2026.

Our education system is built on trust—trust that those elected to oversee our schools will put students first and respect the very taxpayers who fund them. Since assuming this role, Minister Calandra has taken a clear-eyed look at how school boards are operating, and whether the current legislative framework is doing enough to protect students and public dollars.

In too many cases, boards have drifted away from their core responsibility: supporting student learning. Some trustees and senior administrators have seen funds as easy come, easy go. Dollars that would be better spent in classrooms have gone to trustees' conveniences and lawsuits among trustees. Spending rules have been stretched or rewritten, while money that should support students is diverted elsewhere.

At the same time, Ontario and the world are facing an economic challenge. Our government is making historic levels of investment in education, but we must ensure that we are protecting that investment.

Teachers tell us that they are overwhelmed, they are under-resourced and they are frustrated by decisions that prioritize bureaucracy over learning outcomes. When boards lose sight of their purpose, it's students who pay the price.

Speaker, accountability is not optional. Trustee roles come with authority, but they also come with strict obligation to students, parents and taxpayers. This is why the action this government has taken to date, including investigations and legislative reform, are so important.

In 2023, we passed the Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act to begin addressing the problems we are seeing with school board governance and accountability. We strengthened the requirements for school boards to have a code of conduct for boards of trustees and created a neutral dispute resolution process and authority to standardize and mandate training requirements for school board leadership.

We also improved accountability and consistency across school boards by allowing the minister to set priorities in important areas for student achievement, like reading and math. We required boards to publicly post a multi-year student achievement plan to provide transparency and greater oversight over the use of provincially funded tax dollars in meeting provincial priorities for student achievement.

And yet we continue to see headline after headline reporting misspending and reckless use of taxpayers' dollars. So, in November 2025, our government passed the Supporting Children and Students Act to more significantly strengthen trustee and board accountability. The act modernized the minister's oversight powers over board finances, governance and performance. It gave the minister clear authority to intervene quickly in matters of public interest, including launching investigations, issuing binding directions or placing a board under supervision. It made it clear that trustees are accountable not just to their boards, but to students, families and the public they serve.

That brings us to today, Speaker. Despite the government's ongoing efforts to uphold public trust and strengthen accountability in Ontario's publicly funded education system, poor behaviour has continued. Eight school boards are currently under provincial supervision. That shows you the minister is prepared to act decisively when the board fails to meet expectations. But ineffective processes and standards make it hard to intervene quickly. That is why stronger oversight tools and clearer accountability measures are necessary to prevent problems before they happen, so we can protect public confidence.

Today, I want to underscore why these reforms matter by pointing to recent examples where board leadership failed to act responsibly with taxpayers' dollars. In each case, it becomes clear that stronger legislation is not just justified, it is essential.

One of the best-known and most glaring examples is the outrageous spending that happened at Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board. Ontarians were shocked to learn that trustees approved nearly \$190,000 for an overseas trip to Italy to buy art for new schools, related expenses for high-end accommodations, fine dining and hospitality costs, and legal fees to manage the fallout. They even changed expense policies shortly before the trip to allow for higher spending, including business class flights and alcohol. This was a shocking misuse of taxpayers' dollars, and our government could not let it stand.

The minister ordered a governance review, which found that trustees repeatedly failed to respect spending controls and did not follow their own procurement policies. Their expense practices lacked discipline, clear approvals or meaningful oversight. Trustees overrode staff advice on contracts and purchasing decisions, increasing costs and undermining fair, transparent processes. The review concluded that financial decision-making had become

entangled in day-to-day operational interference, eroding accountability and control. Weak expense governance contributed to declining staff morale, high turnover in senior leadership and growing internal instability.

In an extraordinary step, our government was forced to introduce proposed legislation that, if passed, would have vacated the office of the trustee who refused to repay the balance owed toward these travel expenses.

This incident is exactly why we reviewed Ontario's school board governance model, because too often, trustees lost sight of their responsibility to students. Sadly, this is just one of the many boards facing serious leadership issues.

Ontario's largest public school board offers another clear example of what happens when trustee oversight fails.

In December 2024, the Auditor General of Ontario released a comprehensive report to the Toronto District School Board. It detailed serious concerns with the board's approach to school safety, capital planning and financial management. Many of these findings echoed issues the Ministry of Education had already raised repeatedly, including a formal warning about the board's failure to meet its financial obligations under the Education Act.

Despite these warnings, trustees did not take sufficient corrective action. A subsequent financial investigation confirmed the board relied heavily on unsustainable actions, such as selling properties just to present a balanced budget. Between 2021 and 2025, millions in proposed cost-saving measures were either not approved by trustees or were insufficient to address ongoing in-year deficits. This left the board's financial position increasingly fragile, and exposed students and taxpayers to growing risk. Faced with continued deterioration and an inability to self-correct, the only responsible course was clear. Provincial supervision became necessary to restore stability and put student outcomes first.

The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board offers another cautionary tale. The board was facing financial instability, accumulated deficits and depleted resources after years of consecutive deficit budgets. Despite clear warnings from the province, the board showed no ability to correct course and was relying on unsustainable, one-time asset sales to try to balance the books.

A financial investigation conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers recommended the board be placed under supervision after a serious breakdown in financial oversight and governance. Despite being told they needed to take action and balance the budget, trustees struggled to address financial issues. Ottawa-Carleton trustees themselves have acknowledged instances where the board failed to act in a financially responsible manner and overstepped into operational decisions, blurring the lines of accountability.

The persistent governance dysfunction, including prolonged meetings, internal conflicts and the loss of senior staff, further weakened the board's ability to serve students effectively. With finances deteriorating and trustee accountability breaking down, provincial supervision became necessary to restore stability, protect taxpayer dollars and refocus the board on student success.

In yet another example, the Near North District School Board was placed under provincial supervision after a ministry review confirmed deep-rooted dysfunction, mismanagement and leadership failure that eroded public trust and disrupted student learning.

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Years of weak oversight led to chaos around the opening of a new JK-to-12 school in Parry Sound, forcing hundreds of students into temporary classrooms, remote learning or a half-demolished high school. A review found a board divided, inexperienced and unable or unwilling to carry out its core responsibilities, with trustees showing a limited understanding of basic governance principles. Leadership instability and poor decision-making created ripple effects that directly impacted students and families, not just board operations.

The minister issued 15 binding directions to restore accountability and strengthen governance, but the board failed to comply with 10 of them within required timelines. That failure made it clear the board could not self-correct. Supervision became necessary to protect students and enforce accountability in a board that had lost sight of its primary responsibility: putting students first.

One of the most recently supervised boards is York Catholic District School Board. This board has been in chaos for years, with revolving-door leadership. With seven directors of education over nine years, trustees have failed to stabilize the situation. York Catholic has been plagued by continued infighting, wasting over \$300,000 in taxpayer dollars on legal fees for internal disputes and code-of-conduct investigations into trustees. Despite the minister giving the board advance notice and time to respond to concerns, it was unable to find realistic solutions to address a deficit and depleted reserves. The minister had little choice but to step in and put the board under supervision.

Speaker, our public education system is one of Ontario's most important public institutions, and it depends on strong governance to function effectively. Trustees are entrusted with significant authority over public dollars and decisions that shape students' futures. With that authority comes a clear responsibility to act with discipline, integrity and a relentless focus on student success. But time and time again, across the province, we have seen what happens when governance breaks down.

At the Bluewater District School Board, one trustee actually showed up to an official board meeting from his bathtub. Yes, Speaker, you heard that right: the bathtub. That really gives you a sense of responsibility trustees bring to our education system. And of course, this triggered code-of-conduct complaints that sucked the school board into spending time and resources investigating why a trustee was in a bathtub instead of focusing on student achievement.

This is what happens when dysfunctional boards become inward-looking. Meetings stretch on without decisions. Priorities blur. Accountability weakens. Projects get delayed. Spending goes off the rails. And students and communities suffer.

Bill 101 is about addressing trustee dysfunction and financial mismanagement. It is about restoring purpose to school boards, which should exist to serve students, not internal politics. This proposed legislation, if passed, is an essential part of our government's plan to ensure every dollar is working as hard as possible for children in classrooms, especially for those who need support the most.

Ontarians expect and deserve a governance framework that steps in early when warning signs appear, sets clear expectations for board leadership and does not hesitate to act when those expectations are not met.

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By confronting governance challenges head-on, reinforcing accountability and insisting on disciplined stewardship of public funds, we strengthen confidence in our schools and refocus the system on what truly matters: student achievement, fiscal responsibility and opportunity for every child across this province.

Thank you for your time.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

M^{me} France Gélinas: I was wondering if the member has ever heard of section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees that Franco-Ontarians will manage their own schools. And how does he reconcile the charter rights of Franco-Ontarians with the section of the bill that gives the minister the right to decide which books and which programs will be taught in French schools?

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you for the question. This bill does not undermine French-language education. Our record on French-language education is one we are proud to defend. Our government has increased funding for the 12 French-language school boards to over \$2.2 billion. That works out to an average of \$19,343 per pupil. Since 2018, we have increased funding for French-language school boards by more than \$560 million, a 33.8% increase. This is an increase of \$3,875 or 25% per pupil, and the results speak for themselves. Graduation rates for French-speaking students are at near-historic highs and consistently higher than the provincial average.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Adil Shamji: I would like to ask the member across what his assessment is of what kind of an impact this legislation will have on reducing class sizes.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you for the question from the member opposite. Based on the latest available data, Ontario has the lowest average pupil-to-adult ratio in kindergarten classes in Canada and the lowest class sizes cap for grades 1 to 3. We are one of only three provinces that have legislated class size caps. In fact, the Financial Accountability Officer has found that Ontario's student-to-teacher ratio remains a historic low of 15-to-16 to 1.

Last year, we increased core education funding by almost \$1 billion to an annual investment of \$30.28 billion, the largest investment in Ontario history. We will continue to support students, parents and teachers while we ensure our school boards are delivering on their mandate to prepare students for success.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question? I recognize the member for Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke—oh, Wellington—Halton Hills.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: I know, we're so similar. But thank you, Speaker.

I will thank the member for his comments. I know he previously served as a school board trustee in York region, so he's very well placed to speak to this legislation.

I actually have a couple of cousins who are currently serving this province as teachers, and when I speak to them, one of the things that they raise as a concern with me is the lack of substance and detail in the curriculum currently in the province of Ontario, and the need that

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they have to fill in the gaps. Actually, another thing I've heard from parents at the same time is concerns about inappropriate or inconsistent content showing up in the classrooms as well.

My question to the member is, can he please explain how mandated, ministry-approved learning resources, building on the long-standing Trillium List approach, will give teachers a reliable, high-quality base to work from while supporting more consistent learning experiences for students, no matter where they live.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you for the question. These changes are about providing a foundation for teachers to build on, not about telling them what to do. Right now, teachers are spending hours on their own time sourcing materials from platforms like Pinterest, Instagram, TikTok, because there is no consistent, vetted, curriculum-aligned starting point for digital and classroom resources.

Ontario already has the Trillium List for textbooks. This bill simply extends the common-sense approach to the digital age. Teachers retain full professional flexibility to supplement with additional materials based on the needs of the students in front of them.

Nothing in this bill takes away teachers' professional judgment. It supports it with a reliable base, so they can spend less time scrambling and more time teaching.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'm pretty sure I'm going to get a canned answer for this. but hope springs eternal in this place, and it seems to be miraculous conversions with Conservatives talking about supporting education and educators.

You know, Mike Harris cut \$1 billion out of the education system, and at that time educators started to have to buy their own classroom resources. During the last Liberal government, myself as an educator, I had to buy classroom sets of calculators. I had to buy my own classroom library. I had to buy so many different things, including buying certain students lunch each day because they were coming to school hungry and having to steal from their friends. We'll get into that story later.

This government is now patting itself on the back for handing \$750 to educators. Is that not a tacit admission that this government is underfunding education by having to hand over this money?

Mr. Billy Pang: Speaker, thank you for the question. As usual, here goes the opposition completely ignoring the facts. Every year this government has been in office, we have increased education funding. We have increased per-pupil funding by more than 23%, and we have increased special education funding by over 36%.

We are investing more than any other government in Ontario history when it comes to repair, renew and construction of new schools. Since 2018, we have invested over \$5 billion to build 169 new schools, completed 124 permanent additions or renovations to existing facilities, created more than 125,000 new student spaces and 9,600 new licensed child care spaces in schools. Over the next 10 years, we are investing over \$30 billion to support school construction.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

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Mr. John Jordan: I want to thank the member for Markham–Unionville for speaking today and sharing some of the stories, which are disturbing. We've heard the examples of school funds in some boards—some boards—being misallocated.

This bill will divide the director of education role into two different roles: the CEO role for finances, operations and administration, and the chief education officer's role, responsible for curriculum delivery and student achievement. Can the member tell us how this division will help with our fiscal accountability and responsibility?

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you for the question. Our school boards are large, complex organizations. The TDSB alone is a \$3-billion operation. They deserve leadership with financial and operational expertise to match. This bill establishes a CEO in every English public and English Catholic board with required business qualifications, along with a chief education officer with the educational qualifications to lead on student achievement. By separating these roles, we make sure boards have someone focused on running the organization well and someone whose only job is the success of students in the classroom, and by requiring ministerial approval for the dismissal of a CEO, we put an end to the kind of trustee chaos that leaves boards without leadership for years on end.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Adil Shamji: Does the member believe this legislation goes far enough or does anything at all to address the mental health crises in our schools?

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you for the question. Regarding mental health, we support enough with this bill because we keep putting in funding, hiring teachers, hiring more EAs, and we are giving more funding for the school, no matter if it's in the hardware or the software. So in all areas we covered, we support the teachers and student success and also parents and the community.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Further debate?

M^{me} France Gélinas: I thought I was getting 20 minutes, so I will use my 10 minutes very wisely.

I want to bring you back to 1912 when Ontario passed regulation 17. Why? Because regulation 17 was a law that the government of Ontario passed that forbade Franco-Ontarians to go to French schools. French schools were not allowed in Ontario. This regulation 17 stayed in Ontario until 1944.

Why am I telling you this? Because I want you to understand how hard francophones have worked over decades to get their first schools. It was not till 1968—1968 is not that far away—that we had the first French secondary schools in Ontario. It was 1998, not even 30 years ago, that we got French school boards in Ontario.

I'm sharing that with you because I want you to understand, as Franco-Ontarians, where we come from; how hard it has been for us to get an education system that supports our kids and allows them to learn French. This is how we pass our culture. This is how we make sure that francophones continue to exist in Ontario. It's through our schools. But every step has been difficult. Every step has been hard.

I will remind you of a date that I will remember for the rest of my life, which we called the Black Thursday. This is when this government, in 2018, in its budget—it was the member from North

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Bay who did those—told us that the French-language university we had worked so hard to get was going to have its funding pulled; that the French-language commissioner we had worked so hard to get was no more, ceased to exist. This was not acceptable.

You cannot take away education opportunities from francophones. Sure, we now have, since 1998, our French school board. We have our elementary school. We have our secondary school. I can tell you what they look like: They are always the oldest, the ugliest, the smallest; the one without the gym, without the library, without the auditorium. Those are the French schools. But we have schools. We don't want to lose them.

Now, what the government was saying is that all of those kids—I presented the private member's bill to create Université de l'Ontario français, the French-language university of Ontario, many, many times. I forgot how many hundreds of students came on the front lawn of Queen's Park to say that they wanted this. They became advocates as really young kids graduating from high school because they wanted to be able to go to a French university. They went to daycare in French. They went to elementary school in French. They went to secondary school in French. They wanted to be able to go to post-secondary in French.

In December of 2017, buried into a budget, the Liberal government gave us some money for Université de l'Ontario français. The francophone community celebrated. It was not an announcement they were proud of, but it was happening. Dyane Adam was chosen as the first president, putting things together, and then this November came where it was being pulled from us.

We organized on December 1. There were manifestations throughout Ontario. In every corner of Ontario where there were francophone people, we had big demonstrations, including in Sudbury. And we won—kind of. The government backed up and, after a year and a half of pushing back, they agreed to let the federal government pay 100% of l'Université de l'Ontario français. It took a year and a half to get this Conservative government to agree to let the federal government pay for a French university in Ontario. That doesn't show a really warm embrace toward this university. It's not going to cost you a penny; the federal government is paying for it, and it took you a year and a half to say yes for that money to come. Really?

How would you feel if you were a francophone facing all of this? You're tolerated by this government. We're not loved, we're not promoted, we're not valued; we're tolerated. We're there and they can't get rid of us, so they—yes. Anyway, the French university is moving on.

But now we have this new bill, and this new bill does not respect section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees to francophones in Ontario the right to have our own school boards; the right to have our own primary and secondary schools. When we see a section of this bill that says that the government—the Minister of Education—can override a decision made by the school board, remember that we have a Canadian Charter of Rights. We have a charter right to govern our own schools, and now we have a bill from this Conservative government that says, "We're going to take some of those rights away."

We're not going to stand for this. We can't. I told you, it's since 1912 that we've been working so hard to have our education system. Whenever a threat comes to our francophone education system in Ontario, it is a threat to our survival. This is the importance of education to francophones in Ontario.

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So when we see a section of this bill that says that the government can override a French school board when it comes to a decision they make regarding what books they want to make available, what instructional material the schools are allowed to use—we're not going to stand for this. We worked too hard, way too long to be able to manage our own schools to let this government go through with powers that take away what took us over a century to get. Take that out.

I know that in some of the bills, you say that it will exclude francophone boards, but it's not all of the bill. Some of the bill applies to francophone boards, takes away the power that section 23 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms gives us. This is wrong. Take it away.

Je voulais utiliser les quelques minutes que j'ai aujourd'hui pour parler des droits des Franco-Ontariens et Franco-Ontariennes d'avoir un système d'éducation que l'on contrôle nous-mêmes.

L'article 23 de la Charte canadienne des droits et libertés nous donne le droit de gérer nos propres écoles. C'est un droit qui nous a pris beaucoup, beaucoup de temps, avant de l'avoir. C'est en 1968 qu'on a eu la première école secondaire francophone en Ontario. Ça ne fait pas si longtemps que ça. C'est en 1998 qu'on a eu les conseils scolaires francophones. Ça ne fait même pas 30 ans de ça. Et là, on a un projet de loi, en ce moment, qui nous enlève certains de ces droits-là.

Il y a de grandes parties du projet de loi 101 qui ne s'appliquent pas aux conseils scolaires francophones. On respecte ça. Ils doivent le respecter. C'est la Charte des droits et libertés qui dit que vous n'avez pas le droit de nous enlever ces pouvoirs-là.

Mais il y a des parties de la loi qui vont complètement à l'encontre de la Charte des droits et libertés de la section 23 qui nous protège. Ça doit être changé.

Le système scolaire francophone, c'est comme ça qu'on garantit que nos enfants peuvent apprendre le français, que la langue française, la culture francophone en Ontario peut continuer d'être là, d'exister.

Le gouvernement de monsieur Ford a démontré à plusieurs reprises qu'il nous tolère, nous les francophones, et qu'il ne nous voit pas comme un atout ou comme quelque chose d'en être fier, mais on est là. On ne s'en va pas. Puis quand on voit dans un projet de loi qu'ils vont à l'encontre de la section 23, bien, on va continuer de pousser. Ça ne peut pas passer.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Thank you to the member from Nickel Belt for her remarks this afternoon. I wanted to talk a little bit, or ask you a question about, French-language education, and specifically teacher education.

Our government has expanded the number of francophone teacher education seats at the University of Ottawa and l'Université de l'Ontario français. So we're adding additional seats. Also, in Bill 101, we're modernizing the teacher education program, reducing the amount of time needed to launch a successful teaching career.

So my question for the member is if she could comment on how those two changes—the increase in the number of francophone teaching seats and the decrease, reduction in the in the time of teacher education courses, how that will impact teachers—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Response?

M^{me} France Gélinas: As the member knows, I represent a riding in northern Ontario. The main university that teaches teachers in northern Ontario is Laurentian University. Laurentian University went through a crisis that the government could have completely avoided. That meant that half of the school that teaches teachers has closed down and is not available.

We need teachers in northern Ontario also, and it's not by sending kids from northern Ontario to Ottawa and Toronto that we will bring more French-speaking teachers to northern Ontario. Northern Ontario needs to be able to have the resources to form a French teacher also.

Am I happy that there are more in Ottawa and Toronto? Yes, absolutely, but northern Ontario counts also, and we would like our fair share.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. John Vanthof: I really appreciated the remarks from my colleague from Nickel Belt, particularly on the fight for francophones to get their own education system.

The Sturgeon Falls education crisis in 1971: At that time, there were 1,200 secondary school students who were francophone and 400 who were anglophone. The school board at the time decided that the school had to be anglophone because it would cost too much.

Things have changed, but in this bill, am I correct in saying that the ministry can direct which books can be used in the francophone system—that that no longer has to be self-directed?

M^{me} France Gélinas: You're absolutely right. The battle that took place in Sturgeon Falls, 800 kids, with their parents, all stood up because they wanted a French school. But we didn't have French boards at the time. We had English boards that directed French schools, and it was—well, we were second class, if a class whatsoever.

In this bill, right now, the minister has the right to decide what books the French schools will use. It's giving it the right to decide what institutional material the French schools will use. This is not acceptable. This goes against the section 23 of the charter. This goes against the battle that took place in Sturgeon Falls in 1971 that finally brought an English secondary school to Sturgeon Falls. Let's remember the past and learn from it.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and thank you for doing such a fine job in that chair.

My question is: We all know about the state of the backlog of disrepair at the TDSB and school boards in general all over Ontario, and how kids are trying to learn when they're not in conducive conditions. There are air quality problems. There are extreme heat problems. I've spoken about Secord public school in this House till I'm blue in the face about their massive portapack system that is still waiting for their renovation and whatnot.

I know your colleague from Toronto—Danforth and my colleague from Scarborough—Guildwood are waiting for schools to be repaired. What about in Nickel Belt? What about your schools in your area? Do they need an investment from this government?

Mme. France Gélinas: Many of the schools in Nickel Belt are very old. The water is not drinkable because there is too much lead in the old pipes. Water pipes used to be made of lead; they have not been changed. Every morning, the janitor comes in and runs the water for about an hour so that when the kids come, they are able to drink the water. Public health is in there all the time, but we had really bad weather where the janitor did not come in in time, did not run the water, but the kids still drank the water that has too much lead in it. That happens in many, many schools that need to be upgraded, and there's no money for that to happen. It puts kids' and teachers' health and lives at risk. Ontario should do better.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Let's go back to the example of 1971 in Sturgeon Falls, where a school board made a decision to deny French-language education rights to 800 students, because there were 400 English students occupying what I understand to be the same school.

Would it not have been an excellent thing at that time for us to have had a piece of legislation that would have allowed the Minister of Education to override that decision and enforce the constitutional rights of that French-speaking minority—or majority, in this case—in order to enforce the Constitution and make that school board deliver the services that were required to that French-speaking group of students? That would have been something that could have been done to defend the French-speaking rights of those French-speaking students.

M^{me} France Gélinas: What I can tell you, Speaker, is that in the bill right now, the minister has the right to set communication policies for the boards. The boards that spoke up and came and organized on December 1 against Black Thursday, against this government, would not be allowed to speak up anymore, because the Minister of Education sets communication policies for the board, which may limit the critical role.

In the example that you have just given, the people spoke up. The people of Sturgeon Falls organized, the kids came out in the streets and the trustees had to listen to them, because they were elected trustees who needed to listen. And was it difficult? Yes. But did the system work? Yes, absolutely. They got a French secondary school in Sturgeon Falls after that.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: To the member from Nickel Belt: I share your concern about the direction this government is taking in controlling, really, what is going to be read and worked with in French school boards.

But I also want to note how impressed I have been by the school trustees in the three different francophone boards in my region. I see passion. I see commitment. Their salary is very low, and yet they are there. Any time I go to a school, they are there, and they're extremely proud of their students. I wonder if you could speak to the importance of those locally elected francophone trustees.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Having French school boards is something that we worked for really, really hard. The people that put their names forward to be on the French school boards, whether Catholic or public—we have eight Catholic, four public—are people that are so, so committed to la francophonie. They want francophone kids to succeed.

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They're not easy jobs. Think about it: You have four boards for the entire province. They cover huge areas. They drive all over the place. They make themselves available. They pick up the phone and help the families and the students. They want each and every student to succeed. This is why they became school board trustees.

I thank them every day for the work that they do. We are really, really fortunate to have them, and we want to keep them. We want to be able to keep electing, choosing who will sit there as a trustee and making sure that they are people who are dedicated to francophone success.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Further debate?

Mr. Adil Shamji: I rise today to discuss the government's new legislation relating to education, which has been ironically called the Putting Student Achievement First Act. I say "ironic" because, mere weeks ago, this government made it crystal clear that they have no intention of putting student achievement first. They made that undeniably clear when they proposed a radical transformation of OSAP, one that dramatically increases the burden that students will face as they seek out post-secondary education.

In fact, mere hours ago, the members of the government had an opportunity to come around and to see new wisdom in that flawed decision, and unfortunately they voted to continue to place an increased financial burden on students. They looked students in the eye and said that they will not invest in their education. They said that in Ontario, a province where doors should open to opportunity, to more employment, to a proper education, they were happy shutting those doors. And by voting no, they said that they are okay with the fact that there will be a new generation of students for whom post-secondary education will no longer be available to them.

They had an opportunity to fix OSAP ASAP, and they chose not to do that. At the same time, on the very same day that they opted to do that, they are subsequently asking us to debate a bill in which they profess to put student achievement first, and that is just so hard to believe.

As I peruse the legislation, it is apparent to me that the fundamental challenges that confront our education system are not being addressed here. We have class sizes that are too large. We have not enough teachers. Not only do we not have enough teachers; we lack the right mix of support staff in our schools. For example, we don't have enough educational assistants. Consequently, we have classrooms in schools being put into lockdown because of behaviour that couldn't be adequately managed, because we didn't have the right staffing or supports in place. And at the same time that we have that, we have the same government also literally letting teachers go. We have schools that are falling further into disrepair. I have my own constituents who are students themselves, students in middle school who have literally come to me and told me that they're ashamed, going to their schools, because they are in such a state of disrepair. Many of them are not even close to being in compliance with modern building standards, aren't even close to being in compliance with the fire code or modern disability standards. There's nothing in here to address that.

There's nothing in this legislation to address the fact—for example, the Toronto District School Board said that its number one priority capital project for last year was a new school in my riding—the number one priority project that they requested, which they were subsequently denied for. That would do something to put student achievement first, to help bring class sizes down, to help ensure that they're safe, supported schools and places of learning that students

can actually be proud of. There's none of that in this legislation, and there's none of that kind of ambition from the members across or from this government.

We face a mental health crisis in our schools. There's nothing in this legislation to address that. One of the members across, earlier when I asked him about that, said that the government is making investments in software and hardware. Sure, we should be embracing innovation, and we should be embracing novel ways of addressing health care and mental health. But if the government's knee-jerk reaction to defending the mental health crisis is to say that they are investing in software and hardware, they're missing the point.

What we need are mental health professionals, mental health programs, adequate funding for the mental health crisis that we face. That's not in this legislation either.

We face challenges in special education. We have classrooms that should be having more educational assistants; teachers who are unable to provide the individualized attention that children who might, for example, have autism require. I don't see any of that in this legislation either.

Instead, what I see is legislation that seeks to consolidate power under the minister and Ministry of Education and that weakens the role of democratically elected trustees.

For example, under this bill, English school board trustees lose their authority to create budgets. That responsibility shifts now to a chief executive officer. While it is true that school board trustees will be able to provide input into who that chief executive officer is, that CEO ultimately becomes accountable not to the trustees, but to the minister and the Ministry of Education. The trustees can, to be fair, approve or reject the budget, but if they reject it, the only thing that happens is, it goes all the way up the chain of command to the Ministry of Education, to the minister, for final approval.

In short, the legs have been cut out from beneath the bodies of the school board trustees—centralized in the ivory tower that exists at the Minister of Education's office.

The bill also creates a new chief education officer, appointed by the CEO, who will be responsible for measuring student success. This adds yet another level of centralized, appointed oversight, further distancing decision-making from local communities.

And of course, it wouldn't be a Conservative bill if the bill didn't give the minister new powers, powers that go far beyond what existed before. The minister will now be able to ban entire categories of board spending, not just limit them. That's like asking the fox to guard the henhouse, because this government has shown no capacity whatsoever to be able to control their own spending. We see over \$110 million of self-promotional advertising that this government continues to persist in, despite our warnings and the warnings of the Auditor General. We see a government whose Premier's office has, I believe, quadrupled the size of its budget under the same Premier who once railed against a so-called gravy train, even though he has become the conductor of his own gravy train.

The minister will also gain broad authority to provide services supporting child care operators, and it doesn't stop there. Ministry approval will now be required for the acquisition of a new site or other lands. There are other operational decisions that boards have historically managed based on local needs and timelines. But for a government that also said that it loves to reduce

red tape, it merely introduces more red tape to a process that was already rather slow to begin with.

Yesterday, I had an opportunity to ask the Minister of Education why it seemed he was more intent on consolidating power and undermining democratically elected trustees. He had a very peculiar response, one that I don't think would actually be acceptable in our classrooms or our schools. He chose to accuse us of being gross—there were some other remarks that followed that.

But imagine that: Imagine a Minister of Education talking down to someone for raising legitimate concerns that teachers, students, parents and their elected representatives have. Would we accept students in our classrooms accusing each other of being gross? If a student spoke up to their teacher and said they were gross, would we accept that? Would we accept that kind of language from our teacher or a principal towards their students? I would put forward that we wouldn't, but apparently, in this distinguished chamber, that is acceptable language and acceptable conduct from, of all people, not just a member of this Legislature but the Minister of Education.

Ms. Catherine Fife: A minister of the crown.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Indeed, a minister of the crown.

The minister likes to call us arrogant, but I cannot think of a more arrogant comment than that.

To be clear, our caucus will always stand up for teachers, students, parents and democracy. To the Minister of Education, if that makes us gross, then so be it. This government should be focused on what is in the best interests of students and certainly not on political machinations that weaken democratic oversight.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Mr. Deepak Anand: My question is very simple. This bill talks about that going to class is equally important—as good—as learning.

When I was a student—I've been to college; I've been to university; I've been to school—it was always important that when you go to class, you meet other students, you learn the curriculum, you build social skills.

My question to the member is simple: What is your opinion about the changes we are proposing with respect to attendance? Do you think it's a good idea? What impact will it have on students and on their growth overall?

Mr. Adil Shamji: Obviously, in any government legislation that's brought before this House, there are usually a bunch of things that are very difficult to stomach and then a smattering of things that are supportable. Encouraging student participation and making that a part of their grade I think is actually a good idea. In fact, I think it's such a good idea that I think we should offer a participation grade incentive to the Premier, and maybe he'll get to question period more often.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

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Ms. Catherine Fife: Thanks to the member from Don Valley West for his presentation on this bill. I am concerned about schedule 2, specifically section 5, where the minister will no longer have to conduct school climate surveys and listen to students.

Now, listening to students, I would think, is a pretty important part of being an educational leader. So these surveys inform policy.

When I ran for school board trustee in 2003, that's how I learned that Black students in the Waterloo Region District School Board didn't feel safe. If you don't feel safe, you're not going to be successful in the school system. If you don't feel included, you're not going to want to go to school.

Public education ultimately is the great equalizer. That's why it's worth fighting for. That's why many trustees run for school board.

So my question to the member: Are you as concerned as I that this legislation will enforce the fact that the Minister of Education won't have to pay attention to students in the system?

Mr. Adil Shamji: I wholeheartedly share that concern. In fact, my colleague yesterday asked the minister about the elimination of mandatory school climate surveys, and the minister's answer was quite alarming. He seemed to target people from gender-diverse backgrounds. I think that kind of bullying behaviour is exactly the kind of behaviour that we're trying to capture and understand in these school climate action surveys.

These surveys allow us to get system-wide insight into things like harassment, bullying, physical safety, mental health, all of which are things that help us ensure that we've got safe school environments. But when we've got a government and, frankly, a Minister of Education who engages in bullying-type behaviour, why would he want to allow these school climate action surveys to continue?

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: We're all hearing from teachers and parents and students and unions and staff at schools all of their concerns about their work environment and the state of schools right now. So I'm wondering if you can maybe list for us the top three things that you think this government should be investing in to improve education in Ontario.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I sincerely appreciate that question from the truly spectacular member from Beaches–East York.

As I've oftentimes said, in health care, people are the backbone of so many of the things that are important to us—in health care and certainly in education as well. We have a dramatic shortage of staffing in our education sector, and I think that needs to be a major source of investment. We don't have enough teachers. We don't have enough educational assistants. So I would certainly prioritize that.

The other two areas that I think cannot get enough attention: obviously, the crisis that we face in mental health care, particularly in our schools, and then, of course, the lack of adequate supports in special education.

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An enlightened government, one that actually cared about putting student achievement first, would have had far more in this legislation around those three priorities and far less preoccupation with centralizing authority in the hands of a single minister.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Further debate?

M. Andrew Dowie: Je prends la parole aujourd'hui afin d'appuyer avec conviction le projet de loi 101, la Loi de 2026 donnant la priorité à la réussite des élèves. Cette loi repose sur un principe fondamental que nous partageons tous : la réussite des élèves doit demeurer au coeur de nos décisions dans le respect du rôle des parents, de l'expertise du personnel enseignant et de la responsabilité des institutions scolaires.

Dans ma circonscription de Windsor–Tecumseh, comme dans l'ensemble des communautés de langue française, les familles s'attendent à ce que chaque dollar investi en éducation soit géré avec rigueur, transparence et dans l'intérêt direct des élèves. Le projet de loi 101 s'inscrit dans cette attente légitime.

Lorsque les structures de gouvernance perdent leur efficacité, ce sont d'abord les élèves qui en subissent les répercussions. Lorsque la gestion financière manque de prévisibilité, la confiance des familles et des communautés s'en trouve fragilisée, et dans la région de Windsor-Essex, ces enjeux ne sont pas théoriques. Ils soulignent l'importance de disposer de mécanismes solides, clairs et respectueux des réalités locales afin de soutenir durablement la réussite scolaire.

Speaker, Ontario is investing more in education than ever before. In 2025-26, core education funding stands at \$30.3 billion. Teachers are receiving direct support, including \$750 annually for elementary classroom supplies and \$16.8 million over three years to strengthen associate teacher support. Major capital investments have been delivered locally in my community since 2018, yet families continue to ask a fair question: If the funding is there, why doesn't it consistently reach students in ways that they can feel?

I mean, I can talk about Beacon Heights, Catholic Central, James L. Dunn, Eastview Horizon—schools built in last couple of years under this government. But at the end of the day, if you don't feel you're getting a quality education, it doesn't matter what the dollar figure is. If the investments are being made and you're not feeling that you're getting a good-quality education, then we must improve.

Two facts are clear: Student achievement must improve faster, particularly in grade 9 math, and governance failures have had real consequences, including provincial supervision of eight boards since 2025.

I highlighted earlier today the Ottawa-Carleton board, where it's very clear parents moved with their feet to the Catholic board after losing confidence in the public board. That's what causes a loss in funding to boards, because we have per-pupil funding. That's the way it ought to be, so that you are not being subject to being treated worse because of the school which you decide to register in.

Bill 101 responds decisively by clarifying authority, strengthening accountability and intervening earlier, before students pay the price.

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The first pillar is governance and accountability, and it's non-negotiable. Bill 101 sets firm guardrails, caps on trustee honoraria, limits on board size and tighter controls on discretionary spending, because education dollars are meant for students, not governance excess. So all the legal bills for code of conduct complaints—that is not a good use of education dollars.

The bill also modernizes leadership, strengthens budget discipline, professionalizes collective bargaining and protects public dollars in capital planning, because deadlock and dysfunction that hold up schools from being improved and hold up education will no longer be tolerated.

The second pillar is consistent, high-quality learning, regardless of your postal code, because Bill 101 ensures access to high-quality, ministry-approved learning resources, restores rigour through mandatory exams and reinforces the importance of attendance and engagement. It strengthens student and family supports and ensures that official board communications stay hyper-focused on education.

Le troisième pilier vise la modernisation du système d'éducation afin de mieux répondre aux réalités d'aujourd'hui et de demain.

Le projet de loi 101 propose des ajustements à la formation à l'enseignement, l'allègement de certains processus administratifs et la mise en place des mécanismes modernes pour traiter les enjeux liés à l'éducation en langue française dans un esprit de collaboration, d'efficacité et de respect des droits.

Now Speaker, Bill 101 is truly about restoring trust clearly, firmly and without apology: trust that funding actually reaches classrooms, trust that governance is disciplined and trust that school boards exist to serve students.

Speaker, I mentioned earlier that we had a number of school projects in my area that hit the brakes. Catholic Central is a project that opened in 2012, and I was happy to be a part of the planning process. It just opened in 2023. Should it really take 11 years to develop a school?

Interjection: No.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: It should not. Thank you for that comment.

I can't imagine what kinds of difficulties my colleagues and everyone in this chamber run into where they see a project that's deadlocked. We see the source of that deadlock happen at the governance level too often.

Back home, I look at some of the battles that have been had over issues like school naming—that really caused division in the community—where parents want that involvement, and the board says, "You know what? We're going to give you a say, but ultimately we're not going to accept your recommendations as community members." That disenfranchises parents and students alike.

We also see the determination of where school should go. Sometimes that planning process is not exactly impeccable. I think of one proposed school in my area that was leaving an established area and going into some lands yet to be developed. But it was surrounded by commercial properties and surrounded by arterial roads. It made for a very unworkable site. I wonder what the oversight looks like in that.

I would also point to a past case where we had a francophone school—de Lamothe-Cadillac is the name of it today. L'école secondaire de Lamothe-Cadillac originally started as école secondaire de Windsor, and then it was named École secondaire Michel-Gratton. Michel Gratton était, effectivement, impliqué dans la politique, et il a un dossier—ce pour quoi il n'est plus en politique. Mais ça n'a pas été considéré par les conseillers scolaires. Comment est-ce possible qu'on ne fasse pas la recherche concernant la nomination d'une personnalité avant de nommer l'école?

We truly, truly, truly need the opportunity to correct mistakes. The Minister of Education plays a strong role. In fact, in this chamber, we are always—always—receiving, on the government side, in question period, a determination that, "Hey, the minister must have the tools to fix the problem." We're hearing that constantly. "Why is this happening on the Minister of Education's watch?"

Well, the Minister of Education also needs the opportunity to correct problems. Without giving some sort of delegation of authority for the minister to correct problems, those problems will continue to materialize over and over again. So it's really a challenge to run into a system where we want change, we want improvement, but we don't want to give tools to decision-makers to actually make decisions.

One of the biggest differences here that I really appreciate is, in fact, that we are also revising some of the mandatory examinations. Do you know what? In university, you're a sitting duck if you're not prepared. One thing that I hear from employers in my community is that students go into the workforce and they don't have confidence in themselves. They don't have the confidence to be put to the test. If you're going through your entire school career without the opportunity to be tested, to study, to understand the background, you are not destined for immediate success in the workforce—when you could have been, had you been prepared appropriately.

So coming down to final-mark weighting—65% coursework, 20% exam, 15% attendance and participation in grades 9 and 10; in grades 11 and 12, that's 65% coursework, 25% exam, 10% attendance and participation. These are great things because it means that not all your eggs are in one basket. You actually must show up to class, because that is part of our society. We aren't based on online all the time. We need socialization as human beings. That's how we learn from one another. That's how we understand one another and learn compassion for one another.

It's vital that we see some changes like what the bill is proposing, so I'd be happy to support it.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

M^{me} France Gélinas: Je voulais juste vérifier : est-ce que tu connais la section 23 de la Charte des droits et libertés, qui donne aux francophones le droit de diriger leurs écoles francophones au travers des conseils scolaires francophones?

Il y a une section du projet de loi qui donne au ministre le droit de diriger ce qui se passe dans les écoles francophones. On a travaillé longtemps pour s'assurer que ce soit les communautés francophones qui dirigent les écoles francophones. Est-ce que le député serait prêt à appuyer un changement dans le projet de loi 101 pour s'assurer que ce soit toujours les conseils scolaires francophones qui prennent les décisions pour les enfants, les élèves et les écoles francophones?

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M. Andrew Dowie: Merci à la députée de Nickel Belt pour sa question. C'est grâce aux francophones que, moi, je parle français. Ma parenté ne parle pas français, et moi, j'étais inscrit au—maintenant c'est le conseil Providence; auparavant c'était le Essex County Catholic District School Board. C'était dirigé dans les années 1980 par un conseil anglophone, et c'était en 1998 qu'on a eu le conseil francophone.

Ça continue aujourd'hui. Mes neveux se sont inscrits aussi dans le système francophone.

Alors moi, je ne suis pas d'accord que ce qui est dans ce projet de loi empiète sur la Charte des droits et liberté parce que les écoles francophones vont non seulement continuer d'exister avec l'appui des enseignants et des conseils scolaires, mais aussi la population va s'agrandir et plus d'étudiants vont pouvoir entrer dans le système francophone pour apprendre le français comme moi j'ai pu l'apprendre.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: My question goes to my favourite member across the aisle, as you all know.

I'm just wondering—because it's been a while since I've been to Windsor. I'm way overdue to come back, so stay tuned on that. But I'm just wondering what your schools are like in Windsor—Tecumseh, what kind of state they're in, if you have umpteen portables at schools, if there's poor air quality, if it's hot in the buildings, if there is AC, and what value there would be in the government investing in improving our schools.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I'm so delighted to be able to respond. It's a privilege to respond to the member from Beaches—East York, who is definitely my favourite Beaches—East York resident and, actually, a great friend, and I'm so happy to have her here.

This government has certainly treated my riding well. I can give some credit to my predecessor Percy Hatfield for being a great member in his own right. But ultimately, I have seen so many investments come to my riding in the last couple of years. I want to thank this government for investing in my community, because our local schools did not have a lot of investment. And there's still more to do. We have open-concept classrooms still in my riding. They're very difficult to learn in.

But \$5 billion have been invested since 2018: 169 new schools, 114 of them with child care; 124 permanent additions, one of them at St. Joseph's Catholic High School in my riding; and creating more than 125,000 new student spaces, 9,600 new licensed child care spaces in the school.

Thanks so much for the question.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): Question?

Ms. Laura Smith: Through you, Madam Speaker: I really appreciated listening to my friend's conversation about accountability and class and examinations.

You talked about something that I thought was very interesting. You talked about school boards that change the names of the schools, which has been controversial in my own neighbourhoods. I'm just wondering—I know you talked a little bit about that, but I'm honestly interested in how you feel that kind of power will make a difference.

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Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you to the member from Thornhill for that question.

You know what? I do think student and parental involvement is key in the naming of schools. I've now seen several cases—certainly in Windsor with Michel-Gratton. In the riding of Essex, I see the Erie Migration District School, where there was an effort to name—none of the local submissions were picked, and a name that the community didn't feel was reflective of the community was actually chosen by the trustees.

Schools are still community-based. When you lose a school, it's like the heart of the community is being taken out. I know many ridings have seen that happen. It's important that that legitimacy be brought to the parents and the students, that they have an involvement in the naming.

I'll say, Beacon Heights—I'm very proud of having Beacon Heights, but the name is not really historical or relevant to our community. It's unfortunate it's so sanitized that it doesn't reflect our history.

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): I recognize the member for Waterloo.

Ms. Catherine Fife: As a past school board trustee and the past president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, our roles were very clear. We had a legislated responsibility for student well-being and also for academic success, because at the time there was a government in place that recognized that students who were healthy and welcomed in the school system would be academically successful as well.

Over the years, the powers to ensure the well-being of students have been whittled down drastically, and yet—

The Acting Speaker (MPP Andrea Hazell): I am so sorry. We've got to move on.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.