



Session:	2/65
Date:	29 November 2016
No:	32

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

TUESDAY, 29 NOVEMBER 2016

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Family and Human Services.

Low-income housing waitlist (further)

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In response to questions taken as notice from the last Question Period, I hereby table information related to the social housing waitlist.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Internet contract (further)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you.

Mr. Speaker, I indicated that the first of this week I would table the Bell Aliant contract.

After consulting with my department I learned that a FOIPP process is still underway in the commissioner's office. Under the freedom of information act the minister's office is not part of this process.

As part of this process, our department advised the applicant and Bell that we had reached our decision to release the full unredacted contract. I will table these letters today.

Bell filed a request for review with the commissioner. The commissioner is now performing this review. Today my department wrote to the commissioner reiterating our position that the contract should be released as soon as possible. I will table this letter also.

The information contained in the contract is nearly 10 years old, and in the department's view the sensitivity of the information does not outweigh the public interest in releasing this contract.

Our government is committed to creating a competitive environment across PEI. We want the best possible value for Islanders.

As is clear by the letters tabled, my department wishes to release the full contract, but we must respect the FOIPP process.

As a minister I am obviously frustrated on this issue. I will continue to pursue the release of the unredacted contract.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

School review consultations (further)

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

On Friday the Member from Alberton-Roseville raised concern about the school review process in the Westisle school family. These concerns were echoed at many meetings our caucus attended also.

Question to the education minister. We've been raising these concerns for some time. Now your own caucus has doubts about your process. Are you prepared to listen to those concerns and act, or will the Premier allow you to?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I will reiterate my response that I gave in the House on Friday. I have great confidence in the process. I have great confidence in the people that are leading the process in respect to school change and school review. It's a process that has been implemented, which is very consistent to school boards across the country, to make sure that we get appropriate balance and the best quality education we possibly can here in our own province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

School supports and excellence

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, I also attended those Westisle meetings. One issue raised at these meetings was the limited access to things like mental health, speech language, and also special needs supports.

Question to the minister: Do you think poor access to these supports helps or hurts student excellence in the Westisle Family of Schools?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Through the Learning Partners Advisory Council, through the Principals Council, through the district advisory councils, we also are hearing, loud and clear, the concern about various supports required to make sure that education in all our schools for all children across Prince Edward Island is equitable and fair.

Through the three rounds of conversations with all those councils it's been a consistent theme. That's why I'm pleased to announce today that we have positioned social-emotional well-being as our second pillar, one of our top three pillars in our mandate in the department of education, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, how will this school review process result in better access to these services which are needed at Westisle Family of Schools?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The school review process, which I said is a five-step process, and really, the process is really looking at all school populations across the Province of Prince Edward Island to make sure that we are using the resources to the best of our potential.

Because as minister I recognize, just like the questions from the Leader of the Opposition, that we do have needs. As government we need to respond to those needs to make sure that we provide the supports that students need in all schools across Prince Edward Island.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Education administration and EELC department review

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I haven't heard yet from the minister how he plans on helping the Westisle Family of Schools.

Another concern many raised at the Westisle meetings was the feeling that rural schools and communities and frontline services are always being first targeted instead of departmental administration.

Question to the minister: Why not conduct a review of the administration and the department beyond the few changes that you've made in order to put more teachers in the classroom?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Last year when I was appointed the Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture for the Province of Prince Edward Island I was tasked with the integration and the implementation of the vision that our government has for public education.

With the integration of the Public School Branch into the department of education, I am very proud that we've been able to protect frontline teaching positions and that we've been able to create a more effective, streamlined department with the reduction of approximately 35 positions that would be identified as administrative positions to make sure that we protect the frontline services to make sure that we're responding to the needs of children in all Island classrooms, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Size of EELC school administration

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's funny to hear the minister talk about him collapsing the department into the district. It's kind of what my questions are about.

We've heard a lot of concerns about your top-heavy administration that you just made reference to, and you dealing with that has taken a backseat to you trying to close schools.

Question to the education minister: When you gobbled up the school board, did the size of your department's school administration increase or did it decrease?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Part of our mandate in the department, part of my mandate as the minister, is making sure that I'm providing leadership in building opportunities for success, achievement, and excellence for all PEI children.

I can attest that we've been able to protect frontline teaching positions as of this year. We've also been able to make a commitment to protect frontline teaching positions for next year.

I was pleased just recently, about four weeks' ago, to make a statement publicly that we're invested in about \$1.3 million with additional supports, not only classroom positions, but also EAs and youth service workers to all Island classrooms, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Administration. The building's full of people that you have that aren't in classrooms, that aren't in front of teachers

every day. Administration has not shrunk at all.

Can you understand, minister, why teachers and students and parents are frustrated that they have to go to public meetings and explain to you to justify to you why they deserve a school and you can't deal with your own administration?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As the Member from Georgetown-St. Peters knows, there needs to be some level of administrative oversight. As I indicated in a few questions previous to the last question is that with the integration of the Public School Branch to the department we've been able to create a more aligned, more effective, more streamlined department, a department that has the integration of instruction tied with curriculum and achievement, and an alignment that allows us to be more connected to frontline educators in the Province of Prince Edward Island, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

What you're doing here is you're making moms and dads go to community meetings, take time away from their children, sports, other activities, family suppers, to justify why they should have a school. Community leaders have to justify why they should have a school, and you won't deal with your ever-bloated administration that you have.

Question to the Premier. Premier, when you seized control of the school system, you said it was going to be lighter and leaner. When you say lighter and leaner did you mean less bureaucracy or less teachers and students in schools?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I want to reiterate that last year when we laid out our plan for the new direction of public education we were very clear that our commitment was to frontline teaching positions, which we have committed to this past September. We also are once again committing to all FTE positions this coming September.

I want to reiterate that there is a need for some level of administration, but I would want to reassure all Members of the Legislative Assembly that we are very efficient, a very aligned, focused department in respect to outcomes and learning and social-emotional well-being of all children in the Province of Prince Edward Island, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We all know what this minister means by lighter and leaner. He goes to Toronto for consulting reports that tell him to close schools. Now we find he's down in Florida doing business in Florida.

Question to the minister: Is having a lighter and leaner education system, a lighter and leaner education bureaucracy, why your department went to Florida to buy brand new branded mugs?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I am extremely proud of the direction that this government is moving in.

I, too, hear from the public – parents, teachers, educators – in respect to the challenges that schools are presented, particularly schools that are overcapacity with large class sizes. We often hear from all the constituents that we represent the issues around class composition and the need for government to make sure that we continue to find parity and balance and

equity for all students across the Province of Prince Edward Island.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Question to the Premier: When you were buying branded mugs in Florida, did you happen to get a quote on t shirts that said: My school was closed and all I got was this lousy mug?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Mr. Speaker, no.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

School closure

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

So under this minister nothing was changed except new pencils and mugs. No faces changed. Absolutely nothing changed. The school board policy changed. No elected school board, that didn't change. All of these things, none of them changed under you except for the mugs that you went to Florida and got.

Question again to the minister: Should students, teachers, and parents at schools you closed be looking forward to getting a Public Schools Branch mug as a consolation prize for their school closing?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I want to remind the Member from Georgetown-St. Peters that this is a very serious conversation that we're having. This conversation we're having is about listening to Islanders from all across Prince Edward Island, both in rural and urban areas, as we continue to find ways to support achievement, support social-emotional well-being of our children in Island classrooms, and most importantly, build confidence in the public in respect to the direction that our

government's moving in to make sure that we're providing quality education for all children as they cross that stage in June for high schools across this province, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I can assure the minister I am quite serious, and I'm quite serious about this invoice I have for mugs from Florida that we can talk about as well.

It seems like the only thing that's getting lighter and leaner are the issues of rural Islanders and, for that matter, students in general right across the board which have been ignored, particularly since the last election.

Question to the minister: Will you take control of your Premier's drive to close schools, listen to Islanders, and put the learner at the centre of the conversation for once?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The conversation of learning is not just a rural conversation. The challenge in respect to overcapacity and under capacity are in all areas of the Province of Prince Edward Island.

My focus as the minister is to continue to look at education, not from a community perspective, but overarching to make sure that there's parity and balance, to make sure that we're not seeing classes with 30-plus students that are experiencing some pretty challenging issues with respect to learning environments. That's our priority.

I do want to remind the Member from Georgetown-St. Peters that our government has been very focused on education across the province. Let's talk about Souris Regional High School new development of \$20 million, the Montague Intermediate of

\$1.6 million, the Montague Senior High School of approximately \$22 million, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

School closure (further)

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I watch and listen and travel to public consultations on education, and this same minister that came to District 1 and closed four schools, I want to offer a word of caution to all Islanders on this government's school review process. Us up in Eastern Kings went through it, went through the promises, the failed promises.

Minister, why are you repeating the same mistakes this government made in 2009 when you closed many schools in Eastern Kings PEI?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I'm very proud of our government's commitment to public education since 2007, not only with the volume of infrastructure – and I know that the Member from Souris-Elmira is extremely proud and pleased and does spend a lot of time at the new \$20 million school which, I believe, was led by a very consultative discussion, and compliment to parents of students in that community to design and be part of that conversation.

We're going to continue to support education, not only in rural communities, but in urban communities because it's about the overarching quality and outcomes for all children and their well-being.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This is the same minister that strolled into Souris and promised them a new school, promised them the green grass. They promised them the world. They came and put a sign up: The future site of the new K-12 school in Souris, just before the election in 2011. But they went and closed the four schools and promised the world.

I'll caution all Islanders across PEI on this government's promises and how they work. Don't trust their promises.

School promises in Eastern Kings

Minister, why has this government failed to deliver on the promises made to Eastern Kings region when you closed our school in Eastern Kings?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Last spring, following my daughter who was playing grade 9 basketball, had the opportunity to be in the Souris school. I must say that there would be a lot of communities all across Prince Edward Island, even in my own riding of District 11 Charlottetown-Parkdale, that would love to have a new \$20 million investment in infrastructure. Very pleased and very proud, and I know that the students in Souris are getting a quality education in the K-12 model that they have.
Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is a nice school. They were promised a new school. It's a renovated school. For \$4 million more you could have had a brand-new school. For \$4 million they were willing to raise the money and you refused it. You refused it. Another \$4 million and they would have had a new school.

I painted my truck, minister. I painted my truck a month ago, it's a 2006. It's still a 2006. It's not a brand-new one because I renovated it.

Minister, why does this government fail to understand the importance of our small schools and our small communities? And why are you coming after rural PEI again?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I, too, want to remind the Member from Souris-Elmira that a \$20 million investment in infrastructure in a K-12 school is more than just a coat of paint.

I want to remind you that we've been very fortunate to separate the politics from investments in rural communities in respect to the needs in infrastructure. I know that there are schools in various parts of the province that were built in the mid-1950s that are getting tired, and very pleased that we've been committed to providing the best we can with the resources we have to do that, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Economic development in rural communities update

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Question to the Minister of Economic Development and Tourism: Minister, could you give us a bit of an update to this House on economic development in rural communities across Prince Edward Island?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Economic development in rural PEI is alive and well. When you look at part of my lending portfolio, we have over \$222 million invested in rural PEI right across from one end of the province to the other. I think that's about 60% of our total lending portfolio. We continue to build small companies, having the Ignition Fund. If you take a look at the number of people that

applied for the Ignition Fund, the majority of them are from rural PEI.

We take the Zone down on lower Queen. Even though it's located in Charlottetown, many of the businesses in there come from rural PEI. We continue to grow rural PEI, whether it be our export growth – thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Economic development assessments

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That's all great news, minister. Glad to hear it. I'm a bit concerned. There were 30 economic development assessments done this fall for this province by your government, and I'd like to ask you a question, minister: Can you tell Islanders how the department carried out these assessments and what the criteria was that you used?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm not sure what reference of assessments the hon. member is talking about.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

Cornwall bypass original plan changes

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Earlier this year the government announced that it was going forward with the Cornwall bypass. Phase one is now largely complete with two new roundabouts having been constructed.

There's been much made by this government for the need for consultation, transparency, and openness in all of its business.

A question to the Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy: What changes in the original plan were implemented due to

public input received in the public meetings held on the Cornwall bypass?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

When we talk about the Trans-Canada Highway extension project that we're presently involved in it should be no surprise to anybody that this project has been on the go since back when Mike Currie announced it. It's taken this long and our partnerships with the federal government to be able to move forward.

But when we look at infrastructure in this province we look at it from a strategic point of view. This is strategic. This will add \$40 million in GDP to the economy of Prince Edward Island as a result of the construction that is going on as part of the Trans-Canada highway extension.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, your first supplementary question.

Cornwall highway studies (further)

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I asked what changes, if any, to the original plan had been made. I heard none.

The minister in a recent presentation to the standing committee cited safety and economic benefits to the town of Cornwall as the two principal reasons for building this \$65 million capital project, one which she touted proudly as the biggest ever capital project on Prince Edward Island.

Can the minister provide this House with the studies or the documents that support this project, firstly as being necessary to improve safety, and secondly, which demonstrate the economic benefits of it to the town of Cornwall?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Actually, I'm not sure if the member was paying attention last week. I tabled over 100 pages dating back to 1979 of a number of

different reports related to exactly why that project was necessary to move ahead, and with the support of the town of Cornwall.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, your second supplementary question.

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you.

In the line of questioning which preceded mine, where the Minister of Economic Development and Tourism was unaware of the existence of the 30 economic assessments, I am also unaware of an economic assessment which has been done to show that this road is indeed necessary or beneficial.

If the research has not yet been done to support the two main rationales for proceeding with this project, then it was frankly irresponsible for government to begin work on it. It is also impossible for us to have an informed debate in this House regarding the appropriation of capital funding for this project if even government does not have this information.

Will this government withhold the approval of the Cornwall bypass until this research has been completed, new fully-formed public consultations held, and that we have a fully informed debate in this House?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Ms. Biggar: Mr. Speaker, consultations on this started back in 1994 with the first plebiscite that the town of Cornwall had, but we have had consultations.

We presented four different options during our consultations. We also have estimates that estimate that there will be over \$10 million in wages over the course of four years for this project; \$24 million will be spent on materials like asphalt and gravel. Again, this is going to add to the economy of Prince Edward Island with over \$40 million in GDP. We will continue to look at strategic investments as part of our infrastructure project on Prince Edward Island.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton.

Federal Recognition of Charlottetown as Birthplace of Confederation

Mr. J. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Many individual residents in the downtown area, the Downtown Residents Association, and even federal MPs have been pursuing Charlottetown's place in history by requesting that parliament pass an act recognizing Charlottetown as the birthplace of Confederation.

MP Wayne Easter currently has a Bill, C-253, that was given first reading in March 2016 and remains in the private members' bill queue in Ottawa.

My question is to the Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture: Has your department taking any initiatives in support of this bill, minister?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Want to acknowledge MP Wayne Easter and others who have gone before, like the former MP George Proud, to have Charlottetown officially recognized as the Birthplace of Confederation. I recognize, our department recognizes, that the act will benefit not only the city but the entire province, and will formalize this recognition by placing it in statute and it would also affirm a significant historical event and strengthen our position as a heritage destination.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton, your first supplementary.

Mr. J. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and thank you, minister.

Minister, will there be any efforts made to support or impress upon the federal government the importance of having this pass before it dies on the order paper in Ottawa?

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The 150th anniversary of our country is in 2017, and an excellent opportunity to finally recognize Charlottetown's place in the story of our country. My department will be writing and staff are currently working on that to support the Government of Canada in joining with our partners to express support for this recognition.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Alberton-Roseville.

Alberton intersection

Mr. Murphy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question's for the minister of transportation. There's a busy intersection in Alberton at the corners of Church and Main Street, which is actually Highway 12 and Highway 152, which is the province's responsibility. In my opinion they're not really that safe.

When you approach the intersection from Northport via Main Street, you have to stop at the stop sign and then proceed out into the middle of the intersection and stop again because there's a building there that obstructs the view. I don't know if there is any other intersection in the province that exists like this one.

Can the minister tell me if there's any plans to realign this intersection to make it safer?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I had the opportunity actually last weekend to be up in Alberton doing some craft shopping in the area. I'm familiar with that particular intersection. It's a three-way stop at the moment. We have had correspondence with the town of Alberton, and with the member from Alberton, who's been a great advocate for that particular issue.

I have sent my staff up there to do an assessment to see what is possible to do any changes in the future and we will continue to work on that with him.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Alberton-Roseville, your first supplementary.

Mr. Murphy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As you mentioned, minister, it is a three-way stop currently. Are there any plans to make it a four-way stop intersection?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We, as I said, did send up and have an assessment done to that particular area. We aren't able to realign it because of the buildings that are on those intersection corners. However, we can make it into a four-way stop. Once we give notice and put some signage up we'd be happy to do that in the immediate future.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Economic development assessments and rural school closure

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As the minister indicated, he's not aware of the assessments that were done, and that's fairly concerning to everyone who is interested in education in this province because those assessments were a key part of this government's plan to close rural schools. Yet they were just one-line assessments like: area's growing, developments underway, lots for new subdivisions, and the more grim – none to report.

To the minister of economic development: Do you feel these simple lines are a firm enough foundation to close rural schools?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank the hon. member for clarifying the

question because I wasn't quite sure where she was coming from.

I can tell you from this point of view of economic development, which is my portfolio, directly related to that we go to the eastern end of the Island and you look at some of the things that we've been doing down there – investment in companies and looking at all our assets across the province, and starting with the Georgetown Timber Yard and what we're doing there to maintain 40-some jobs in that area.

What we've done with Slemon Park, purchasing Slemon Park so we can react quickly to new proposed businesses that are going to enter into there. We're looking at SRDC and CADC because we don't see as urban-rural anymore, they're all interlinked. We want to continue to grow urban PEI and rural PEI equally, and I think that's important.

The investments that we're making and the changes that we're making are strategic and we'll continue to do so.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Maybe the minister of economic development could have a conversation with the minister of education. We realize in rural communities that we are growing, that the future does look bright. I would suggest that we're going to need to have schools in those rural communities to ensure that the future does look bright.

Islanders deserve to know from you, minister of economic development, where we really are as a province and not read it from this school change process report which was very discouraging, I think, to all Islanders.

Minister, why did you not even bother to conduct a meaningful assessment of the current state of economic development across our province before this report was done?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Member from Belfast-Murray River raises some great points. The school change policy which is being led by the Public School Branch has a very well laid-out process. Step 1 was data collection and direction of the process; two was the public consultations to identify viable options.

But some of the discussions that are coming from that, one is local knowledge, and that is knowledge from the community through the public conversations. I must say that there are some tremendous conversations going on across Prince Edward Island now about public education. It's not about what we're potentially going to lose, it's about opportunity.

We're being very respectful, from what I'm picking up. There's no play book, there's no agenda. We want to make sure that we continue to provide the best quality education in our province, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Future of PEI

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I, as well, can comment on some of the positive things that are happening in my district. We have an expansion of the Gillis Lodge, 20 new jobs. We have a new church, a Presbyterian church right next to the Southern Kings Consolidated School. I think one of only two churches built in Canada for the Presbytery last year, with the whole focus being to be next to a school, and how important that is to rural communities to develop that hub.

Imagine the economic development we would have if we had a long-term commitment to Northumberland Ferries and a ferry contract. Those are just a few examples.

Minister, I feel the education department in this report are wrong and I would like to know: Do you agree that we do have – and

this is to the minister of education – do we in fact have a very bright future across all of PEI, including rural communities?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As the minister of education I am extremely committed to making sure that we continue to move the quality of education for all children, not only from an academic achievement perspective, but making sure that our schools are whole, our schools are supporting children in respect to meeting their needs. I think we would all recognize, as Members of the Legislative Assembly, that the needs of children today coming through our public school system are a whole lot different than they were 10 and 15 and 20 years ago.

We'll be paying attention and we'll be very well balanced in the conversation. I have great confidence in the leadership and the process that's underway to address some of the points that the member from Murray Harbour addressed.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Population strategy

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning has been in his position now for 18 months. In fact, I remember him saying that he's got his mandate letter on the wall of his office. The first priority of that mandate letter is to create a population strategy for PEI.

Minister, where is that strategy?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning.

Mr. R. Brown: We have a working draft, Mr. Speaker, working its way through government.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Does the minister see the population growing in every region of our province under this new government policy?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning.

Mr. R. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you for the question. Yes.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Can the minister tell us how much population growth this strategy will target specifically over the next five years?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning.

Mr. R. Brown: Mr. Speaker, as has been said in the throne speech, we are looking at a population growth to 150,000.

We are ahead of target and we look very good at reaching 150,000 and exceeding that limit.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That's great news, and it's really good to hear that we're trending in the right direction. We're doing well, especially in all regions of our province.

I wish that this minister would saunter on over to the minister of education and maybe give his updated numbers to him. Because you know what? The minister of education is spreading population data across PEI that says they don't have a plan for population growth. It says that they're showing reduced numbers of students.

School change and population growth

Question to the minister of education: Why does your school change process assume such meagre population growth over the next five years when we have the Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning here saying that: No, hold on, the population is booming?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

My hope as the minister of education is that we continue to grow the population. Part of the school change and review process, which should be being conducted on a regular basis or every three to five years, needs to respond to the changing demographics.

The reality of the situation we're currently in, in communities all across the Province of Prince Edward Island is because governments of the present and governments of the past have not supported a very progressive evaluation of demographic shifts, populations, trends in respect to where people are choosing to live.

This school change policy, which I said is very consistent to every other jurisdiction in the country, we'll be working very closely with all government departments to make sure that we provide the best support we possibly can in respect to any potential decisions on any recommendations that are made.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's a bit disturbing to hear we have one minister saying that: No, we've got a population strategy that's circling around government, it's going to do well, we're on trend, we're going to hit 150,000 people, but then we have another minister who is out there showing data to all public meetings right across PEI saying that: No, our population is going down.

Which is it? Does the minister of education believe that our rural population is going to grow?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

My wish, as the minister of education, is that we continue to see robust growth in all communities across the province.

But we also have to recognize, currently, as it sits today, that we have some very serious situations in respect to overcapacity and we've got some very real situations as far as under utilization.

It's not just about rural Prince Edward Island. You can drive through the city of Charlottetown, and identify an overcapacity school and an under-utilized school within two to five minutes of one another.

The objective is to find better balance and best use of the resources we have to continue to move the quality of public education as one of our key pillars for a prosperous province, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Population strategy and minimum teaching allocation

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I couldn't agree more. We do have serious issues with some of our urban school. It's insane, the overcrowding and stuff. But that doesn't mean you have drag all these rural schools into this whole process. You don't have to do that. Let's fix the issues in urban PEI.

Minister, do you think reinvesting in schools with a minimum teaching allocation strategy would be a wise plank for a population strategy?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As I said numerous times in the Legislative Assembly, the school review process is a process that I have tremendous confidence in. It's a process that will give us better information in respect to staffing and decisions moving forward.

We have some real issues. In September of this year we have overcapacity and under-utilized buildings and we need to address those situations. It's not just about rural Prince Edward Island. There is real or more complex or more challenging in city areas of the province.

Through the process, through a very open, transparent dialogue, we hope to get recommendations from the Public School Branch that will support and continue to move our system forward.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid, final question.

Deleted government email accounts (further)

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My final question is to the Premier: Premier, which email accounts were deleted?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I am becoming very familiar with records information management in my role as the education minister. I do have the responsibility under the legislation.

We will be presenting and bringing forward a framework. I have taken the question under advisement. When the staff gives me the information I will table that information.

But I look forward to responding to the Auditor General's report, which I take very seriously in my mandate as the education minister, to make sure that we tighten up enforcement in the legislation, to make sure

that we have new, modern infrastructure, make sure that we have appropriate training, make sure we have the staffing and resources to modernize our IM in this province, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

[End of Question Period]