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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
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RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

WEDNESDAY, 6 DECEMBER 2017

Responses to Questions Taken As Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Recently, this government hurriedly announced a Seniors Independence Program during the Parkdale by-election. The announcement was very short on details, as we've become accustomed to, missing many facts, including an actual budget.

Seniors Independence Program budget

My first question is to the Premier: Premier, why is there no budget for the Seniors Independence Program?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, this program was brought forward in the Speech From the Throne and it was a great response immediately in the public sphere to the news. And with the prospect of winter coming it was felt that the best thing is to proceed with the offer starting January 1st, and the details of what seniors can expect from this program.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Yet again, it appears this government rushed announcements out the door without any planning or thought.

The fibre op backbone, the grandparent caregivers, Sherwood School, and now the seniors' program; no budgets determined, no funds allocated, just headlines – or, as you will, good news announcements during a polling period, or in this case, a by-election.

Again, question to the Premier: Where is the funding for this program found in this year's Budget?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, let me not take all of those items, because it would take more than my time, but the Sherwood School came out of a very thoughtful process, recommendations from the Public Schools Branch, through to the capital planning budget process, and a budget that's now been approved by this House. So, I don't know why anyone is saying that there's no money for that and the timeline has been well laid out. The work that will be done through the seniors' program that has been present and will be on offer the first of January will be available through the Department of Family and Human Services in the 2017-2018 budget.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Fibre op back bone project

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

The Premier references the Sherwood School, which could be in the Capital Budget, but again, he doesn't show us where the fibre op backbone budget is for \$30 million.

Government's press release states: the first phase begins on January the 1st and work will continue to develop – the final program, which will be implemented in April.

Again, question to the Premier: Can you clarify the difference between your first phase and the final program, which apparently is not even developed yet.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the questions that are directed here are about the funding. One is in the 2017-2018 budget, one is in the 2018-2019 budget here and that, of course, will be presented when that 2018-2019 budget comes forward. But Mr. Speaker, it seems to me that we get from the opposition – it's either: you're going too fast, or you're going too slow. It's like Goldilocks – nothing seems to be right.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

As we all are aware, Goldilocks was a fairy tale of which many of these promises of this government seems to be as of late.

An Hon. Member: Oh.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Income criteria for senior programs

Leader of the Opposition: Mr. Speaker, this government has a troubling history of deliberately designing programs that are restrictive. This announcement sets income thresholds of just over \$22,000 for single seniors and just over \$31,000 for senior couples after taxes. Government's own statistics show that over 28,000 Islanders are aged 65 years or older.

Question again to the Premier: How many of our 28,000 Island seniors fit into your program's income criteria?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm going to back up even further than the Speech From the Throne and I'm going to back up to this past summer when I attended an event at UPEI, put on by an 80 year old PhD candidate. There she had 10 women who were pioneers in aging. They were 85

years or older, living in rural communities on their own. They listed things that enabled them to stay in their communities. Those are all things that we developed this program around.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Number of seniors qualified for programs

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

It's great to develop a program where it's so restrictive that the majority of people it's supposed to help isn't even accessible to those individuals. There's a reason why government settled upon this criteria, in fact, it was the only detail of the program that was announced. The Premier needs to be upfront and tell us how many seniors fall within this criteria and how many of those will actually receive assistance.

Again, question to the Premier: Give us the number. How many seniors qualify based on your income thresholds?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's really a difficult question to ask, but I'm going to back up again a little bit more and talk about the low-income measure.

That is the measurement that we use to identify the low-income threshold across Canada. That is a nationally recognized program. It is one that the Veterans Affairs Canada program follows. That's the one that we based our guidelines on and our thresholds. So, they are nationally recognized. The federal government recognizes them, and we don't know at this point how much uptake there is going to be on this program. So, I cannot give him answer as to how many seniors will be using this program until we actually roll it out and get started.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Good news announcements

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

We still have no true detail from government about this program. This is another example of seeking a headline without doing their homework. Again, a good news announcement, if you will, during a polling period – or in this case, a by-election.

Question to the Premier: Why is the headline you wrote so far from the truth that you are unable to address these questions today?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: Hon. Member, I just want to warn you that you're bordering on unparliamentary language: 'So far from the truth', indicating you're lying.

Mr. MacEwen: Mr. Speaker, he used the exact same language that was used yesterday (Indistinct)

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct)

Ms. Casey: (Indistinct) question challenging the Speaker.

Speaker: I'm just making a statement, okay?

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

Premier MacLauchlan: Perhaps the member would like to reframe the question.

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct) are you the Speaker or (Indistinct)

Speaker: Could you repeat the question or –

Leader of the Opposition: Mr. Speaker, my question stands as it was previously stated.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

An Hon. Member: Oh.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Well I guess the member opposite is not withdrawing as he said he would, but let me say, Mr. Speaker, on the point of what's accurate or not, I don't write the headlines, so I can't really answer that part of the question. But let me say precisely on what's being asked here today and it's, again, if we go ahead and do something, you'll say we're doing it too fast, and if we take our time, and think it through, and work on evidence, you'll say we're going too slow. On this one, we offered a program. It's very clear what the benefits will be. There are 7,000 senior families in this province that are under the income threshold and they will decide whether they step forward and take advantage.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Opening closed adoption records

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I was encouraged to hear recently that this government appears to be – we're starting to see some movement to have a conversation about opening adoption records that are presently closed.

Could the Minister of Family and Human Services explain what the current process is for someone who wants to access their adoption records?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, this is an issue that is very personal and very sensitive to many Islanders. We've been listening to their concerns and we have agreed to review the program as it stands right now and we will

and we are engaging in the public. We will be going out to public consultations in January and we will hear from all Islanders – all parties that are a part and parcel to the adoption process.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Requests for adoption records

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I actually asked if she could explain what the process was for accessing adoption records. I'll try a different one.

Generally, how long does it take for a person to receive the adoption records that they request and what do they typically receive back, Mr. Speaker?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'll go back and I will answer that question. We do have Post Adoption Services within our adoption program. That process – if an individual, a birth parent it could be, or it could be the adoptee – can contact post adoptive services, and they can access non-identifying information about either their birth parent or their adoptee and we will do our very best to provide them with that non-identifying information.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Closed adoption records in PEI

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

A majority of Canadian provinces and territories have an open adoption record system. PEI currently is among the

shrinking minority of provinces and territories that use a closed adoption record system.

Question to the minister: How many closed adoption records does the province currently oversee?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you.

Again, Mr. Speaker, I know how passionate and how sensitive this issue is to very many people and we do our very best, within our department, to help those people seeking information.

Currently, under the *Adoption Act* all of our adoptions are closed unless previously arranged. In the last few years the majority of our adoptions, we have been trying to push towards an open adoption system. But currently all of the records would be closed, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Length of time for closed adoption records

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Could the minister tell us how long of a time period these closed adoption records would cover?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Mr. Speaker, again, I can't stress how many stories I heard this past summer; how many emails I received from people who are very, very passionate. I can't imagine what it feels like to not know where you came from. I can't. I can't imagine being a mother, who would have given up a

child and not know if every child that they look at walking down the street is that child.

We know this is sensitive. We know this is something we need to look at and we have agreed to do that. We've already started a jurisdictional scan of other provinces and we are going to be going out to hear from all of Prince Edward Islanders to hear their views on this subject, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm glad the minister is getting a number of these calls and emails. These services are important to help adoptees and their birth parents reconnect with each other.

Dollars spent on post-adoption services

Question to the minister: What does the province currently spend annually on post-adoption services?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Mr. Speaker, this is not about dollars and cents. This is about people. This is about people's lives. This is about people's feelings. This is about a government that is listening to their concerns. That is why we are taking a jurisdictional scan. We are talking to other provinces to try and learn what worked with them and what didn't work with them so that we can bring back a program that will help all Islanders.

First, we have to hear from all Islanders and we are listening.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Commitment to opening PEI adoption records

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I couldn't agree more. These added costs shouldn't be a reason or a deterrent to do this.

Will the minister commit today to 100% making PEI's adoption records open?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I am glad that the hon. member is asking these questions because they are questions that need to be asked.

We are committed to listening to all parties because there are three parties in every adoption. There is the birth parent. There is the adoptee, and there is the parent that adopted them.

I, as minister, I need to listen to all voices and I'm committed to doing that. We will listen. We will have recommendations –

Mr. LaVie: Answer the question.

Ms. Mundy: – by the end of the spring. And if legislative changes are necessary, we're going to do them in the fall.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

When a birth mother is given a choice in taking an active role in helping chose adoptive parents, having contact with them to share family, medical, and social information and, perhaps, even build – helping put an adoption plan together with them, including; what, if any future communication she will have after the placement. This is often known as an open adoption process. Although, not for

everyone. There are very many advantages to this type of open arrangement that result in the best outcome for all involved, especially the child.

Open adoption processes

A question for the minister of Family and Human Services: Minister, will you commit to reviewing legislation and regulations that govern adoptions on PEI to ensure that these sorts of open adoptions are possible?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

If I'm not mistaken, we do have some adoptions that we have been arranging that are open adoptions. That we do have all parties involved. So, we are currently doing that, but it has to be something that all parties agree to going in. That will be part, again, of the review. And if the *Adoption Act* needs to be changed to actually have that on the books, then, so be it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Now, really is a great time to have this conversation around adoption here on PEI. At the PEI women's wellness clinic there is an opportunity for adoption-related supports and counselling for Island women at all stages of family planning.

Adoption support in women's wellness clinic

Question to the minister of Family and Human Services: Minister, will you commit to including adoption in the support and counselling offered at the women's wellness clinic?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My grandmother always said to me that: I was given two ears and one mouth. Because I was intended to listen twice as much as I spoke.

This is what I intend to do: I intend to listen to Islanders who have all sorts of views on the subject. If that is something that Islanders feel that we need, then we will act on it. But I can't commit to doing anything until we do a proper, thorough, and comprehensive review.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, minister. Definitely, this is something that I'm hearing out across the Island. Adoption is something that has a lot to offer our Island. We do see people, many people that have to leave Prince Edward Island to pursue adoptions.

I do understand that adoption is a privilege, not a right, and it's not something to be taken lightly. It's a lifelong commitment; has a huge impact on the people involved, both children and parents, but the benefits are generally enormous.

Currently, it takes many years to adopt a child on PEI. Some advocates believe that there's a lot of room for improvement.

Improvement of adoption process on PEI

Question to the minister: What work have you undertaken, what actions have you taken now, to improve the adoption process here on PEI?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think the review is a huge action. We were only talking to advocates. This was only brought to our attention, this summer is when I started receiving calls, and started engaging with people, who brought it to my attention.

The fact that, within a few short months, we have put a working group together; we have gone out and started talking to other provinces and learning from what they've learned and what worked for them and what didn't work for them. And the fact that we have committed to reviewing, and going out to public engagement in January, I think those are huge, huge actions that we are taking to improve adoption services on Prince Edward Island.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We all want the best for these children and families who are seeking adoption. All families seeking adoptions are required to have a home study done and pass through many rigorous steps.

Government's own literature on adoption states that it takes five or more years before adoptive parents can welcome a child into their family.

Minister: Will you commit to a timeline as to when your review of legislation and regulation to remove barriers to adoption will be complete here on PEI?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I hear stories and I don't have to look too far to hear a story each and every day about how adoption has impacted someone's life and made their live even better.

Our own member, over here, from –

An Hon. Member: West Royalty.

Ms. Mundy: – West Royalty, he got up and he shared his experience on how rich his life has been because of the child that they adopted and how the story of how that, that child and that mother were working together and didn't even know it –

Mr. Trivers: When is your review going to be done?

Ms. Mundy: – I do not have to go far not to hear – I think I've already answered that. I said that we were going out to public consultation in January. We're hoping to have recommendations back by this spring.

If changes need to happen, we're hoping to have them by the fall.

Speaker: Thank you, minister.

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

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

In the recent Speech From the Throne, government committed to launch, during this sitting, a process to review and update the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*.

Review process of FOIPP Act

Question to the Minister of Justice and Public Safety: What is the process that you envision for this review?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Third Party is correct, that we said that we would launch that during this sitting, and it's anticipated that that will be brought forward about mid-next week.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

The Access and Privacy Commissioner recently presented her recommendations to the Standing Committee on Communities, Land and Environment. During her appearance there, she mentioned that government had undertaken an internal review of the act in 2012.

Tabling and review of FOIPP Act

Again to the minister: Can you table the document in the House and explain why that review was never acted on?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, when the document is brought forward and the process is laid out next week, the work that was done in 2012 will be incorporated into that review.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

Premier, you promised to review FOIPP in your 2015 throne speech, yet you have waited over two-and-a-half years before you actually started the process and I'm beginning to worry that you're not entirely committed to fulfilling this review and introducing new legislation during your mandate.

Can you tell me how long this process will take and assure this House that you will amend the act during this mandate?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, let me remind the member opposite, and all members of the House, that the throne speech in 2015 laid out the mandate for the full four years and indeed, at that time it was made clear that it would be in the latter half of the mandate that the FOIPP review would take place. The actions that will follow on that review will have to wait until review has been conducted.

But, it will be done. It will be open. It will invite input from everyone here in this House and from Islanders, and we'll be in a better position then to know what changes will be needed.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question is for the Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning. Earlier this week we heard news of shortage of skilled workers in the autobody industry and also in the ultrasound technician field, to name a few.

Skilled workers labour shortages

Minister: How does your department work with Holland College, of which there is a campus in Summerside, to identify labour shortages and gaps in the workforce to ensure local businesses have the skilled workers they need to be successful?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much for the question, hon. member.

Our department has a close working relationship with Holland College and our other two post-secondary institutions here on PEI, UPEI and *Collège de l'Île*. We share our labour market information with Holland College, and Holland College has a program advisory committee in place which deals with employers. As stated in my mandate letter: Our responsibility is to set up an employer's council in the near future and we're looking forward to doing that in the New Year.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot, your first supplementary.

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Attracting students into trades

Recruitment is a big part of ensuring successful programs. Can the minister inform the House what Holland College is doing to attract more students in those trades that are experiencing labour shortages?

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

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Holland College has an outreach program to the schools to talk to the schools and see if the youth are interested in any trades. Our department also works with education and culture to get information out to the schools on the apprenticeship programs. If something is not available here on PEI, our department will help students get the training if they have to go off-Island.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot, your second supplementary.

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister: Have there been any talks about short, specialized training sessions in Summerside that could address the gaps in the labour force?

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

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

To the hon. member, yes there is. We've had the privilege to participate in some programs that there were shortages in. Like, there were some short-term programs like school bus drivers that needed to be filled and the short-order cooks, there were also some construction trade workers that needed to be filled. So, we continue to work with our employers and try to create an environment

where we can match up employees with employers and provide the proper training.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

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

There was a recent article in the *Globe and Mail* and the papers across Canada that indicated that there were \$175 million of unclaimed benefits for the working income tax benefit; \$175 million was not claimed. Imagine what this money could have done to the families that were affected in a low-income bracket.

Unclaimed benefits and low-income families

I ask the Minister of Family and Human Services: What is her department doing to make sure that we maximize the benefits available to people, especially low-income families?

Thank you.

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We realized that, hon. member, about a year and a half ago and that is when we came up with the idea of going out to the public and making them aware of the federal benefits and provincial benefits that they might be missing out on. The hon. member across the floor mentioned yesterday, the be aware and get your share program. It has been very successful.

We started it last fall. We went across the Island. There were over 100 information sessions that we held and we reached over 2,000 Islanders, and the hon. member next to me here got up and he told a very heart-warming story about an Islander who was aware and got her share, and she received a cheque for \$3,000.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

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

The Canadian Revenue Agency has a tremendous database available there. They have all the income tax returns online and I'm wondering if the minister's department, first of all, could work with the department of CRA, the revenue agency, and make the forms a little bit more simpler. The complication forms – is one of the complaints of many people is the forms are very complicated so they don't fill them out.

CRA and benefit of programs

Also: Could her department work with the CRA to identify people on Prince Edward Island that are potentially not taking advantage of these benefits, and that maybe her department could go out and contact these people with the information given by CRA in order to make sure that we take advantage of these programs? After all, they are for families, families in need, and anything we can do for families in need is good for society.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I couldn't agree more and the be aware and get your share program was actually a great collaboration between CRA, my department and workforce and advanced learning. We are very much aware of the fact that those forms are very difficult for Islanders, especially seniors, to fill out.

One of the things that we did with the CRA is we created these – or helped drive people to these community information tax centres and where they had volunteers preparing tax returns free of charge to any Island senior that needed help. The amount of centres that we have across the Island actually doubled after our be aware get your share campaign, and the uptake – there was 5% more

Islanders actually – or roughly around 300 more Islanders getting their taxes done at the community volunteer tax centres.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The safety of our children when they leave the house every day is the top of mind for parents.

Bus stop locations and safety screen

Question to the minister of education: What criteria is used when determining bus stop locations for the Public Schools Branch and what safety screen is applied?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

The Public Schools Branch has a criteria and a policy that's outlined to determine where school bus stops might be, and the safety of the child is one of the utmost concerns in that policy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Well, the safety of students should be the utmost concern of everybody in this Assembly.

Question again to the minister: What measures are in place to protect students and to notify all of the students, the staff and the parents of ongoing investigations involving staff?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

I'm not sure – the hon. member had indicated ongoing investigations relating to staff. I'm not sure what he meant by that. Are we still talking about school buses, Mr. Speaker, or are we talking about something else?

Thank you.

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

Protection of students and staff

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Ongoing investigations about staff is exactly that: Ongoing investigations with staff.

Question to the minister of education: What do those policies say about the protection of students, parents and staff when a staff member is involved in a criminal proceeding?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

As I had indicated previously, we take, in the Public Schools Branch and the French Language School Board, take the safety of our students and of their families as a foremost concern when they're looking at things. Depending on what is going on and the nature of the allegations against a staff individual, the reaction might be different.

There are policies that dictate how those would proceed, Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to say that the Public Schools Branch does their utmost to enforce them.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thankfully, these types of situations are rare, but not as rare as we would like them to be. Over the last two years there have been two high-profile cases that have made these concerns top of mind.

Timeline for removal of staff from classroom

Question to the minister of education: When a staff member becomes involved in a criminal proceeding, what steps are taken to remove the person from the classroom and how long does that take?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

In the circumstances where there is a serious offence that might relate to the safety of the children, those members typically have their conduct reviewed and a suspension would take place fairly immediately.

To the best of my recollection, that did occur in the two cases that the member has spoken about here today, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

One of those high-profile cases was the school vice-principal that taught healthy relationship courses and he was charged and pled guilty with criminal harassment.

Question to the minister: When the Public Schools Branch becomes aware of situations like this, what requirements are there to notify parents and staff?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

There is a balancing that needs to occur when this type of event takes place. The first and foremost consideration is the safety of students and staff. That's why, if there is a serious criminal allegation such as that, the Public Schools Branch, in this case, would look at suspension of the individual. They would move forward from there to determine what recourse might need to take place as they go forward.

You have to keep in mind that there is a presumption of innocence in this country and we can't be going off on the basis of allegations making statements that don't have a foundation in fact.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm quite shocked by the minister's answer. This isn't a courtroom. This is classroom we're talking about. So, you don't think we should take steps to protect the children. When you can put someone on administrative leave if there's a criminal investigation going on, you should.

In the case that I spoke of, parents and staff learned of the situation when the court proceedings were reported by the media.

In the most recent example, a pattern of delayed notification was also present. A teacher was involved in a criminal proceeding, but again, parents and students found out when they read the media reports.

Notifying parents of allegations

Question to the minister: Do you consider it an appropriate method to notify parents and students, the media versus, telling them yourselves?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

Again, I did indicate that student and family safety is one of the foremost concerns in situations such as this. As I had indicated, an administrative leave was entered in that place. The Public Schools Branch did participate with the police in investigating that matter. Student safety was foremost in the minds of the Public Schools Branch in administering their policy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In the most recent case, pretty serious charges have been laid. I think that the parents deserve to know. I think the parents deserve to know long before it made the media. I think it was the duty of you to make sure that no one else had been harmed by the teacher.

In the most recent case, your staff initially told the parents that the teacher was put out on medical leave; that he had a sore back. Not that they were the focus on ongoing sexual investigation into sexual assault and interference involving youth.

Question to the minister: Can you explain why parents were given an inaccurate explanation of why that teacher was no longer in the classroom?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

I can't speak to the specifics as to what the hon. member has indicated went on at that particular point in time. But I will say this: I do have a great deal of faith in the Public Schools Branch, who is responsible to administer the policy that they have in place.

I think that the policy does a great deal to ensure the safety of the children in a situation such as that. I think that there was a great deal done in that particular situation to ensure that that policy was adhered to.

I would like to thank the Public Schools Branch for taking those steps.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We're hearing from parents. Actually I heard from parents, in this case, long before it ever made public; long before it ever made courts. I was waiting for all the parents to find out from the school that this was happening so they could go home and check with their own children to make sure that they were never put in a position of compromise with the teacher.

That's something that you were responsible to make happen.

Question to the minister: Do you feel it's okay to have those accused of sexual assault in our classrooms?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

As I indicated there is a policy at the Public Schools Branch, in this particular case that deals with these sorts of matters.

I can tell you with a fair degree of certainty that if there is any allegation of that kind of conduct they take it very, very seriously. They do an investigation. In this case, the police were involved. They did a very formal investigation. The investigation resulted in charges against that individual. Ultimately, the individual was put on administrative leave. There was no time after those allegations were made that he was in the classroom.

Ultimately, that matter went through the courts and the Public Schools Branch dealt with the matter without having the member back in the classroom.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

All too often, we, in the opposition ask questions; we watch government members hide behind bureaucratic policy. This is a case where I'm not going to allow it to happen.

Your policy is broken, because parents are unhappy with your policy, parents are coming to us saying: well, what happened? How come we weren't notified this happened? How come we didn't – we weren't notified that there was a predator in the classroom in our schools?

Reviewing of school board policies

Question to the minister: Will you commit to reviewing your policies?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

Again, it's the Public Schools Branch that administers this policy, but we're always open and we have a mind to ensuring the safety of our learners in the classrooms. That is the job of our department. Certainly, we take it very seriously. I will certainly commit to continuing to do that, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Here is the place where we come to ask questions and get answers for people. It's not my fault that our phones are ringing off the hooks with people that were concerned by your policies or the school board's policies, or whoever it is that you want to hide behind today in Question Period.

These are your questions. They're for you. You are the head of the schools.

I heard it from the Premier when he said: The minister was the head of schools on Prince Edward Island, period. No question about it. We know for sure, it's you.

Question to you, again: Do you know of any other investigations going on in our school system today that parents are unaware of that are criminal?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

No, I'm not personally aware of any other investigations that are going on today.

Again, I will reiterate: our Public Schools Branch and the French Language School Board, both take the protection of students as being one of the utmost factors in their day-to-day operations.

I have the utmost of confidence that they will continue to do that. I think coming in here today and carrying on like this is just fear mongering to try and indicate that they're not doing their job –

An Hon. Member: Oh!

Mr. J. Brown: – Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct)

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters, final question.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

And I take exception to him saying that I'm carrying on. I'm bringing very important concerns forward by parents, who actually live in your district, who didn't feel it necessary to follow-up with you because they didn't think they'd get any action. They only thought they would get action if they came over here.

To tell the truth: you aren't doing your job. You aren't doing your job if parents aren't being notified of these situations: completely ridiculous. I believe you when you say that you aren't currently aware of anything because there is probably a policy preventing them from telling you, too. Who knows? That is the problem.

Will you commit today that you'll make sure there are clearly defined policies on how you notify students, parents, and the staff when it comes to criminal investigations inside a school?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

I do take great offence to the hon. Member's statement that parents wouldn't come to me with their concerns, and I would indicate that in relation to the investigation the hon. Member's talking about, I was not sitting in this chair by the time that the criminal sentencing was done, so I do take a great offence to that statement. But, let me assure you of this: We do work with the Public Schools Branch and the French Language School Board to ensure the safety and protection of the students that go to school in our system, Mr. Speaker, every single day.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[End of Question Period]