



Session:	1/66
Date:	27 November 2020
No:	65

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY  
OF  
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD  
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

FRIDAY, 27 NOVEMBER 2020



Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

**Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

The Premier said over and over again that he wants to do politics differently and that he wants to be collaborative. I have to say: I'm happy to say that I think all of us in this Legislature have made improvements in that regard. But collaboration requires the sharing of information, amongst other things.

One of the core functions of our Legislative Assembly is to scrutinize government spending. In fact, some would say that that is the core function of the Legislative Assembly: to oversee the spending of taxpayers' dollars. But in order to do this well, we need to have good information on what government is doing with that money.

**Government spending of public funds**

A question to the Premier: Do you agree that a collaborative government should be open and forthcoming with information about how it spends public funds?

**Speaker:** The hon. Premier.

**Premier King:** Mr. Speaker, I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question and I do agree with his lead-up to it: that I think every person in this Legislature, since we've gotten here, have exhibited a desire to collaborate and to act differently – I think more so than any time in our history. I think that's a good thing for everybody in here, but it's a good thing for all Islanders, as well.

The scrutiny of the spending of taxpayers' dollars, I think I would agree, is probably the most critical aspect of what we do in here. I am trying our best to be as open as we possibly can be to get back information and if there's ways to improve that, Mr. Speaker, I remain open to them.

**Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

During debate on the Capital Budget over the last few days, our caucus has been repeatedly asking for that information that the Premier would like to provide us with about the various projects included in the budget. We've heard the line so often: We'll get back you. We've heard that over and over again from the Minister of Finance who's sitting on the floor representing government for this process. In the past, these requests for information have not always been fulfilled.

**Providing info from Capital Budget to House**

To the Premier: Will your ministers bring all of this information back to the House, or do you expect us to pass a budget without actually knowing fully what's in it?

**Speaker:** The hon. Premier.

**Premier King:** Mr. Speaker, I think when we deliberate the capital budget or the operational budget in the spring there's a process that has been sort of a tradition that has evolved over time and I think we have to continue to make changes into that and to improve it, as I say: staff do watch here. If there are questions, they're directed by us to get these questions back. We try our hardest to get them back.

Once again, I remain open to any good idea that would make it easier for – I don't necessarily think I have to make it easier for you to support the document. I have to give you as much information as you can to make an informed decision and I'd like to continue to explore ways to do that.

**Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

I really appreciate that answer, Premier, thank you.

One of the traditions surrounding the budget scrutiny process is that it's normal practice for ministers in the House to intervene in the debate to provide more information, because they are the ones who are, of course, the most familiar with their files with that department. But over the last few days, with very few exceptions, the government bench has been stubborn in its refusal to provide information, even when they are asked directly.

### **Refusal to provide information**

To the Premier: Why have your ministers been ignoring our questions and did you order the ministers to keep quiet and not respond to those questions?

**Some Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Speaker:** The hon. Premier.

**Premier King:** I've been watching for the most part the same deliberations that everybody else in here has been in. What I have been watching is the finance minister with her Assistant to the Treasury Board, Gordon MacFadyen providing the information from a capital budget perspective. There's been numerous times when there have been interventions from – myself, included, on questions as they pertain. I think that will continue.

We are proud of the document that we have tabled here. It was developed in collaboration with everybody, all the parties in this Legislature with broad consultation across the province. I'm proud of it and I want it to be, obviously, passed, but I want a comfort level to know that you know what we're doing and why. I continue to try to be helpful in that regard.

**Speaker:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

**Leader of the Opposition:** The Minister of Finance and Gordon have been doing a fine job. They're two people trying their best to provide us with answers, but it's literally impossible for one minister and one stranger, albeit somebody who works intimately of course in Treasury Board, to have all of the answers to these questions, which is why it's so important that the ministers who are present in the room who

have more detail, more knowledge than those two individuals who are trying to carry this themselves, are available for comment.

One of the more disturbing developments during the debate on this budget is that on multiple occasions now the government has used its majority to force through sections of the budget without providing us with the information that we need to do our jobs and to make an informed decision. You've effectively been shutting down debate. I know that the PCs of the past would've been absolutely horrified by that behaviour.

### **Providing info from Capital Budget to House (further)**

A question to the Premier: Why are you trying to ram through the budget in this House without proper scrutiny?

**Some Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Speaker:** The hon. Premier.

**Premier King:** Mr. Speaker, I think we're getting an incredible amount of scrutiny to the budget. I don't know what he refers to as the ramming through. I wasn't in the Legislature last night when a vote was held but I saw members of both parties supporting the carrying of the section. I don't know if that fits the narrative that the leader – well, the Leader of the Third Party voted for it for sure, so it's not a ramming through.

I wasn't in the Legislature when that particular debate was happening, but the Capital Budget outlines the capital expenditures of the province. I think where there is a little bit of confusion or back and forth and there are a lot of questions about the operational aspects of a department that obviously the Minister of Finance or the secretary to the Treasury Board couldn't answer within this particular document. That is why we have opportunities such as this to ask those questions.

By no means are we trying to ram anything through. I'll stay here until the end of the time if that's what the opposition desires to get this passed and to do good things for PEI.

I'm in absolutely no rush to get out of the Legislature.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

**Ms. Altass:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Last night, we heard for the first time that the Province is planning to construct two or maybe three health hubs. When our caucus presented this idea to government, when they subsequently committed to build rural health care hubs, we tabled substantial research on our proposal and we followed up with more research when there were questions from the Third Party on exactly what was meant by a rural health hub.

Despite repeated questioning last night from our caucus, to which there were no offered interventions, it was impossible to discern what government means by the term health hub.

#### **Definition of health care hub**

A question to the minister of health: The conventional idea of a rural hub incorporates acute care, primary care, diagnostic services, supports for citizens with chronic conditions and perhaps housing for people who require high-level nursing care needs. Minister, is this what you're talking about?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Mr. Aylward:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Currently, we're going through a process for our rural health initiative. Part of that process is consultation. We have a survey ongoing right now asking people in communities, particularly rural communities, what services they feel that they require in their communities.

Every community on PEI is unique to itself. What we're going through right now is an exercise to ascertain what exact services are required in say, maybe O'Leary, what's required in Montague, what's required in Souris, what's required in South Shore.

That's the exercise we're going through right now and I'm very proud of the work

that the department is doing and I'm excited about the feedback that we're receiving thus far.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

**Ms. Altass:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm unclear as to why that information couldn't have been shared with us last night when we asked.

I also want to note that two of these hubs involve new builds so if there's still consultation ongoing with the community, I'm not sure how you're already moving forward without – you have this idea of exactly what they're going to look like but you're still doing consultation. I'm quite confused about that process.

We also learned that the implementation of the electronic medical record system or EMR will be delayed until March 2022 and that even though the tender has been awarded for this, somehow negotiations continue when the work has not even yet begun.

Having an EMR or a digital record system that will support patient care across services and over time is a basic expectation of all health care professionals and essential to their work.

#### **Functioning of the EMR system**

Question to the minister of health: How do you expect to recruit and retain doctors to PEI without a functioning integrated electronic medical record system?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Mr. Aylward:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I do agree it can be a challenge to recruit doctors without a functioning EMR.

I said here in the House yesterday that since May 2019, we've actually recruited 30 doctors to PEI. The completion date or the implementation date of March 2022 is

incorrect. We are weeks away from finalizing the contract with the vendor. Unfortunately, it was slowed down due to COVID. The vendor that we're negotiating with was not willing to take on any new clients at that time due to the fact that there was travel restrictions, their technicians couldn't travel from one jurisdiction to another but, as I said, we're extremely close to signing this contract, the rollout, the implementation of the EMR will start early in 2021 and the completion date is expected to be no later than March of 2022.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

**Ms. Altass:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

What I'm hearing here, what the minister just said, is that the information provided to us last night by the Minister of Finance was incorrect and there was no intervention offered to correct that information.

It makes it very difficult on this side of the House to really have a meaningful conversation about the budget when we can't get answers when we're asking questions and we're getting incorrect information. How do I know what other information is correct or not correct? How do I know that?

**Some Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Ms. Altass:** Last night during debate, we were told that the building of the new mental health hospital won't even begin until 2023, with an expected completion date at least five years out. Not providing sufficient resources to the master planning team is causing this delay, bringing into question the priority of mental health services for this government.

#### **Safety concerns at Hillsborough Hospital (further)**

Question to the minister of health: How do you expect to recruit and retain doctors and nurses in mental health and addictions knowing they will have to work in the outdated and unsafe Hillsborough Hospital for at least five more years?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Mr. Aylward:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Unfortunately, the hon. member continues to say that there's only three people working on the project. That's the furthest thing from the truth and when we table the documents, she will see – everyone will see the org chart – the detailed information with regards to how many people are working on the project. It's a cross-departmental project, as well.

Again, I'm very proud of the work that's being done within health and wellness and Health PEI and across other government departments to get this project going.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton.

**Mr. Hammarlund:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There are over 1,000 housing units owned and operated by the Province, but it's been pointed out by my colleagues from Charlottetown-Belvedere: it's not enough to have a roof over your head. People need a home where they can live and grow and build a community. This is especially important for families with children.

#### **New housing builds and on-site playgrounds**

Question to the Minister of Social Development and Housing: What are your plans for including on-site playgrounds as part of housing units currently planned or under construction?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

**Mr. Hudson:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

To the hon. member, I do appreciate that. It's something, I'll be honest myself, that I have not given consideration to, but it is, it's an excellent suggestion and I would more than welcome the opportunity to have

further discussion with any of the hon. members on this. Again, the collaboration – the feedback that we receive – thank you for that suggestion. I do appreciate it.

Thank you.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton.

**Mr. Hammarlund:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In my past experience designing housing projects, playgrounds was an essential item. It wasn't even considered not having it.

People living in single family homes usually enjoy access to things like gardens, a terrace, and backyards, which are great for children.

#### **New housing builds and outside space**

Question to the Minister of Social Development and Housing: What are your plans to include an outside space as part of the new housing units for families?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

**Mr. Hudson:** Thank you very much again, Mr. Speaker.

As I had said previously, I do thank the hon. member for the suggestion. I think one of the things, though, that we do have to remember is that the units that are under construction – the units of the PEI Housing Corporation that currently exist – they are in towns, they are in villages, they're in municipalities that really, for the most part, do have playgrounds – do have park areas and the like.

But again, back to the original comment, I think it is something that is very worthwhile to take a look at with new builds, and even existing builds, to take a look across the board what park area – what playgrounds are in the vicinity, and if there is not any there, then we should be taking a look at that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton.

**Mr. Hammarlund:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thanks for the answer, although I must admit I'm shocked that it isn't part of the basic considerations in your planning and design.

Statistically, single-parent households, which are predominantly women, have the highest poverty rate.

#### **Needed facilities for children at risk**

Question to the Minister of Social Development and Housing: How are you working with the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women to ensure that needed facilities for children at risk are available in government family housing units?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

**Mr. Hudson:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Yes, I certainly have continuous conversations with the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women. I think if you look at the number of programs, the funding, and the increases that we've provided – you look at Blooming House, for example: 120,000 – an additional 25,000 to Blooming House under social supports. Also, you look at – that we provide to Anderson House through Family Violence Prevention Services: 680,000 – that we do have units right across the province. I'm not going to go into the details with regard to the location, but even in the West Prince area, there is a duplex there for women with family who are experiencing family violence. We are always there, day and night, to provide those services and to provide a roof over their head.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

**Ms. Lund:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Last week, I asked about the water extraction permit that was approved for the Dunk River and the minister of environment told us that the proclamation of the *Water Act* will take care of this sort of issue.

The policies that the minister ignored are not future ones that will come into effect under the *Water Act*; they're regulations that are already in place now.

### **Following of regulations in the Water Act**

Question to the Premier: How can Islanders have confidence that this government will properly enforce the *Water Act* when they're clearly not following the regulations that are in place now?

**Speaker:** The hon. Premier.

**Premier King:** Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for the question and the passion that she brings to this Legislature every day to get results for PEI.

As we said in here many times, the issue around water has been a delicate and emotional conversation for sure. We work very, very hard to put in place these parameters and regulations and protocols to protect our water and we think the *Water Act* will strengthen that and I'm looking forward to its proclamation.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

**Ms. Lund:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I fear that the Premier didn't hear me. The parameters were already in place on this issue.

Ultimately, the Premier is responsible for ensuring his ministers do the work on behalf of Islanders properly.

In approving a water extraction permit for the Dunk River this summer, the minister responsible for the protection of water went against policies that are already in place.

Question to the Premier: Do you condone the decision of the minister to ignore existing water guideline regulations from her own department?

**Speaker:** The hon. Premier.

**Premier King:** Mr. Speaker, the issue around the situation of the Dunk River was a very difficult and challenging one. We had asked the department to take a look, because we were in a precarious situation, a near drought situation, we were presented with some options in terms of in an emergency situation to see if we could have a little relief for the agricultural sector and that's what we asked the department to explore. That's how we move forward.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

**Ms. Lund:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm alarmed. The *Water Act* is a good piece of legislation, but it will only be effective at protecting water if government properly implements it.

Whether it came from the minister or the Premier, this decision seriously undermines this government's credibility when it comes to implementing the *Water Act*.

Question to the Premier: What other water protection policies, what parts of the *Water Act* will you allow your minister to ignore?

**Speaker:** The hon. Premier.

**Premier King:** Mr. Speaker, I think this really stems from the conversation that we were having yesterday and in previous, that is that the issue of water can't just be one issue. It has to be looked at in the context of a bigger plan. I think when you look at the situation, like surface irrigation, for example, is that a better option as opposed to offering it through other irrigation opportunities? Is it a little bit easier on an estuary or a watershed if we do it from underground as opposed to taking from the surface?

I think the conversation has evolved in a good way. I think it needs to continue but, at the same time in this province, there's always a delicate balance. Agriculture is our biggest economic generator. When we have money being generated through our economy, we're able to make the investments in social housing, investments



in the economy that need to be made and there's a delicate balance there.

Every day in here, we try to walk along that very delicate balance. It's a difficult one. I don't think we've figured it out yet, I think we're getting closer to it but I think more conversation and debate is required.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Cornwall-Meadowbank.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question is to the finance minister today.

Here in this House and on the street, we've heard a number of stories about Islanders struggling, given the circumstances of COVID-19. Islanders who have been laid off, had their hours reduced, had their wages cut or had their business seasons devastated, needing help, heading into what could be a very hard holiday season. We know that holiday times are challenging, even at the best of times and we know that nine times out of 10, it's related to stress associated with money or more specifically, a lack thereof.

### **Struggling Islanders during COVID re: Christmas**

Is there anything that the minister can provide to us today to tell us how we can alleviate some of this pressure?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Finance.

**Ms. Compton:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thanks for the question.

There have been a number of programs for Islanders, both federally and provincially and we continue to be there to support Islanders. The CERB was one of them, and the opportunity now to get your EI with 120 hours, both federal programs, but we've had a number of provincial programs as well to ensure that what Islanders need to keep safe and remain safe is there for them.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Cornwall-Meadowbank.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I fully understand, minister, that there's over \$700 million came into this province from the federal government and many good programs. But I feel that you have a \$60 million contingency fund in the provincial budget, so maybe it's time that we took a look at, to get through this next month or even the next two months, and ensure that community groups like the Lions Clubs and the food banks who are doing a lot of the heavy lifting at this time of the year, have some sort of package provided to them from the provincial government. It would go a long way in helping school counsellors and the non-for-profits that are actually dealing with these situations on a day-to-day basis.

Is there anything that this government can do?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Finance.

**Ms. Compton:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We are here continually for Islanders. We've rolled out 13 programs from this province. The most in the country, hon. member, and we'll continue to be there for Islanders. We know that the service groups are there. We will do what we can to help them through this. We've also seen, a number of people have mentioned, community groups that are actually getting more donations than they had before through this COVID time. I think, as Islanders, we work together, we band together, and we look after one another.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Cornwall-Meadowbank, your second supplementary.

**Mr. MacDonald:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'll just inform the minister that, yes, they're getting more donations, minister, but I can tell you from my area alone, the requests for Christmas hamper baskets has doubled this year. They're going to need more, but they're still going to need more, besides those hamper baskets they're going to need to be provided to. The children are going to be home from school now, so we need to ensure that our stress level and our mental health is looked after.

I will credit this government. On the outset of this pandemic, Islanders could access grocery store gift cards and I thought that was an exceptional program and we all took advantage on it.

### **Reinstatement of grocery store gift cards**

Perhaps the Premier can chime in on this, but at the very least, could your government reinstate that program for the next two months to help some of these families get through this tough time?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Finance.

**Ms. Compton:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question.

It's a wonderful idea. I'll present that to the minister of economic development and growth to see what we can do.

We are still in a pretty good place when it comes to COVID. I spoke to my daughter in Vancouver last night, basically have not left their condo since March. We are not in that place. She commented on her colleagues saying what a great job we're doing here in PEI to implement mandatory masking which they're still not doing out there.

We will do whatever we can, hon. member, to ensure the safety of Islanders and to help them get through the holiday season and moving forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

**Mr. McNeilly:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yesterday in the House, we heard from the minister of education state he had no concerns whatsoever when it came to learning gaps that Island students may have as a result of online learning they experienced in the spring. I think he called it a non-issue. This was a disappointing response from the minister as he is ultimately responsible for ensuring that our Island students receive high quality education. He indicated that his department had all the necessary information to ensure gaps did not exist in the education of Island students.

To quote an August 5<sup>th</sup> CBC article: The province was not able to gather detailed data on the learning impacts of COVID-19 pandemic last spring. This quote came from an official within the minister's own department.

### **Learning gaps as result of online learning**

Question to the minister: Does the minister still stand by this statement that he had all the information required to determine that gaps did not exist?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

**Mr. Trivers:** Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

The member across really has to get his story straight about what he's actually asking about. He asked yesterday about assessments and whether I was comfortable that we were assessing students properly to know where they were at. And the answer is: Yes, we are. It's done every day by our teachers. We know exactly where our students are at. That is not an issue and that's what he was asking yesterday.

Today, he's asking a different question and he's muddying the waters a little bit. Indeed, we do know that gaps do exist from the pandemic and we do know that we need to address them. The team at the department of education is leading the nation when it comes to addressing these gaps. They started in April, as soon as schools were shut down, to identify the key outcomes, compress the curriculum, and make sure that our students, this fall, are having those gaps addressed.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

**Mr. McNeilly:** Well, the only thing being muddied here is the minister muddying his own department. I mean, there's no standard. It's not being equitably – around the entire province. I must say, this is a concern to hear the minister repeatedly stand up in the House and state something is not an issue when we hear from others in education, parents, students – that there is gaps because of COVID and the way we learned in the spring.

When the return to class plan was released, the province's Director of English Education, Programs and Services told the media that the Province was unable to gather detailed data on learning impact resulting from online learning last spring.

Question to the minister: When the minister declared this a non-issue yesterday, was he aware that his own department publicly stated they didn't have reliable data on this important topic?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

**Mr. Trivers:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Let's be clear. The department has known from the very beginning that there are definitely gaps. We knew as soon we had to close schools in the spring and we couldn't teach to the curriculum while the students were at home. We call that at-home learning, not remote learning, because we weren't teaching the curriculum – that there would gaps. That's why the department immediately – immediately – started compressing the curriculum, identifying the key outcomes to make sure they can move that forward so those gaps were addressed this fall.

I can't stress this enough: We're pretty much the only jurisdiction in the entire country that did this because of the excellent work in our department. I just want to commend the teachers again for the great work they're doing in this stressful time. There's not a single jurisdiction across this entire country that are doing any sort of standardized assessments. Mr. Speaker, Prince Edward Island has the best education system in the country right now.

Thank you.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty, your second supplementary.

**Mr. McNeilly:** Well, Mr. Speaker, this type of question comes from parents in my district who are nervous and watching their kids in their education falling behind currently because there's no assessment. The online learning plan was very casual at best. Yes, the teachers are doing a good job, but minister, you need to take control and do

something proactive as the minister to make sure that we get better education outcomes for our students.

There's a theme that's developing with this minister when he faces relevant important questions in the House.

**Mr. Henderson:** (Indistinct) dodging (Indistinct) –

**Mr. McNeilly:** He quickly dismisses other concerns and declares them as not issues. We heard him declare that there was not an issue with the bus and the CUPE situation before. We heard him say the teachers had no concerns, only to hear from many teachers who feel overwhelmed and under-supported.

I'm tired of the minister dismissing concern raised by educators, workers in the school system, students, and parents.

#### **Addressing learning gaps in education**

Will the minister please drop the damn excuses and stop dodging the important issues and start addressing learning gaps in education with the importance they deserve?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

**Mr. Trivers:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I stand behind our experts in the department of education. I stand behind the plans they've come up. I stand behind all the amazing work that they've done in the face of an unprecedented pandemic. I stand behind them because they're doing the best work in the country. We continue to provide supports to our education system, to our teachers, to all the staff that work there, and most importantly, the students.

When it comes to gaps, I would encourage the member across to have his constituents talk to their teacher or their students and say: My student is struggling and they may have some gaps and what can we do to address it? That's what I tell any parents that contact me because our teachers are there on the frontlines. They're expert, and frankly, they're doing a really great job.

Thank you.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road.

**Mr. Perry:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As we all know, these past number of months have been exceptionally difficult for our post-secondary students. I've watched as our Island students adapted to challenges that COVID has presented to them as they begin their studies in 2020-2021 school year.

In particular, students have had to adapt to new methods of learning, new environments, and new challenges. These students have shown resilience at a time when summer employment was not as strong as most seasons, at a time when tuitions have increased and at a time when high speed internet is not accessible in many areas of our province.

I believe it is fair to say students need financial support now more than ever.

### **Campaign promise – increase George Coles Bursary**

My question is to the Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning: Why did you decide not to honour your campaign promise and increase the George Coles Bursary?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

**Mr. Trivers:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This is a topic that has been broached in the House before. I will stand behind, firmly, the supports that we offer students on this Island. I think that – and I'll get these numbers for the member, as well – that there is a huge percentage, especially the low and middle-income student Islanders, that can have their entire tuition covered right now under our current programs.

As the minister of education, I take my position really seriously in terms of being financially prudent and making sure we help everybody. I think that's exactly what we're doing right now.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road.

**Mr. Perry:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you to the former liberal government for making over 1,000 students able to go to university for free.

**Some Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Mr. Perry:** As I said at the top of my questions, it's very difficult for our Island post-secondary students. They have seen job opportunities dry up, they're experiencing more economic hardship than most post-secondary students typically encounter.

Government has the ability to help these students and it's important that they act on this important issue and follow through on an election promise.

### **Support for Island students**

Will the minister commit to offering additional financial support to Island students attending post-secondary this fall, as promised?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

**Mr. Trivers:** Mr. Speaker, I just wanted to give the member across a few facts about the Island Advantage Bursary, which is a low and middle-income bursary. The budget for 2020-2021 actually increased by \$700,000 for a total of \$2 million. An average student receives approximately \$1,900. Last year, it was only \$1,692. A significant increase.

As of October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, there were 977 Island students entitled to that: 756 at UPEI, 220 at Holland College and one at Collège de l'Île.

Interim payments of approximately 1.5 million have been disbursed by November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020. We're definitely stepping up, we're supporting students. I hear the member coming across but, frankly, I haven't had a single student complain to me about this issue.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road, your second supplementary.

**Mr. Perry:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm asking these questions on behalf of a constituent who emailed the minister on Monday of this week. He did hear from somebody, he heard from one of my constituents and I have the email, I was copied on it.

The minister is talking about income-based bursaries. I'm talking about the George Coles Bursary, the one that was promised during the last election by this government.

Many students who are facing financial hardships, they were promised an increase would go a long way in taking the financial stress off their shoulders. We also have many Islanders who seek opportunities not offered in our province but these individuals would be excluded from the George Coles Bursary. This could be an individual who is taking chemical engineering, for instance, with the intention to return to PEI for work.

#### **George Coles Bursary for students studying off-Island**

Minister, will your government look at extending the George Coles Bursary to students who have no choice but to leave PEI to gain a degree that's not offered here in Prince Edward Island?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

**Mr. Trivers:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The intent of the George Coles Bursary, I believe, is to help Island students study and really, we want them to study on Prince Edward Island. Yes, do I understand that there are degrees that are not offered on PEI? Absolutely.

This is something we will consider again. I believe it's important to be financially prudent and we've heard the Leader of the Opposition talk about this magic money faucet and maybe the Member from Tignish-Palmer Road has a magic money faucet of his own. I don't know.

We will look into this again and we will assess it and we'll look at the costs and see if it's feasible.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Morell-Donagh.

**Mr. MacEwen:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Last night, in Capital Estimates, we heard a few more details and more about more funding for the rural health care hub initiative that this government has talked about.

#### **Rural health care hub in eastern PEI**

A question to the health minister: These hubs should be about expanding accessibility for important health care services. I'm really excited about the possibility of a rural health care hub coming to the North Shore of PEI. Minister, what consultation process have you done in eastern PEI?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Mr. Aylward:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As I alluded to earlier here today, we currently have an online survey that we're doing across the Island. That's also available in hardcopy if an individual so requests.

We're also doing a survey for providers. We have targeted focus groups across PEI that are going to be taking place at public conversations in rural PEI. I certainly will have more information coming in the next few weeks. As the survey dates conclude and we correlate the information, we'll be able to share what has been formulated.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Morell-Donagh.

**Mr. MacEwen:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I've been meeting with the health care minister since 2017, in fact, and with the leadership of the communities in our district about more health care services for our area, specifically with the municipalities of Mount Stewart, Morrell and St. Peters. We do not have a physician number assigned to our area. We have a nurse practitioner for three hours a week.

We've got a lot of good things going on. We have a new potential renovated pharmacy that's going to be expanding. We have an amazing physio service as well in the area. We could use a base for home care out there. We could use a new diabetes care out there; COPD care.

### **Increasing health care services in eastern PEI**

Minister, will you look at our area for increasing health care services in eastern PEI?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Mr. Aylward:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Excellent question, and that's exactly why we're going through the exercise that we're doing right now. We're looking for the public consultation. We're looking for consultation and information from providers.

We're not prepared to make a decision on any one community or all communities right now until we have all the information back. But certainly, the north side will be considered just like any other community here on PEI.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Morell-Donagh, your second supplementary.

**Mr. MacEwen:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The health minister used to say, and I really like this, it used to be about the right care, in the right place, at the right time, from the right provider. And I believe in that too.

Minister, will you commit to meeting with the communities on the north side, the leadership there, to find out what our needs are, and deliver a rural health care hub right in the middle of District 7 in eastern PEI?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

**Mr. Aylward:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I would be delighted to travel to Morrell and meet with the group out there. As the hon. member knows, I've already had discussions with one of the councillors from the area. I always enjoy going back to Morrell, which is where my father hails from, and my ancestors came from Ireland and settled there.

Yes, indeed, I will arrange a meeting.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Ms. Bernard:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I received a concerning message this morning informing me that schools received an email communication informing them that student wellbeing teams are hitting their capacity and will start triaging students based on urgency, with suicidal ideation being the top priority.

This message also said that student wellbeing teams have noticed there is a trend in schools where part-time counsellors are referred more frequently to them. They have agreed that more school counsellors would help with this situation. I shared yesterday that school counsellors are genuinely concerned about the lives of students they work with and the ones they simply do not have time to work with. Lives are at stake.

### **Announcement re: student wellbeing teams**

Question to the minister of education: Yesterday you stood in this House and told us that there was an exciting announcement coming up. Is there anything you would like to announce today based on that information?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

**Mr. Trivers:** Mr. Speaker, there's lots of things I would like to announce today, but I need to make sure I follow the proper processes and procedures. So I'm not going to announce things prematurely.

However, rest assured that the issues that the member across is talking about are things that, obviously, we take very, very seriously. Obviously, we're communicating closely with schools about it. Support is coming.

**Speaker:** The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot, final question.

**Ms. Lund:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our caucus has spoken about the importance of having money circulate in the local economy, and with the suspension of the Atlantic bubble, that's more important than ever.

The House of Commons recently unanimously moved to have government extend the student loan moratorium. For many recent graduates, student loan payments are a significant monthly expense that's preventing them from participating more fully in the economy. According to government's website, the deferral of PEI student loan payments ended on September 30<sup>th</sup>.

#### **Extension of student loan payment deferral**

Question to the minister of education: Will you commit to renewing the provincial moratorium on student loan payments?

**Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

**Mr. Trivers:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think that's a great suggestion. I won't commit to it solidly today but I'll definitely take that back to the department and we'll look at that very closely.

Thank you.

**Some Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

End of Question Period