

## **Excerpts from Minister Hancock's Address to the 92<sup>nd</sup> Alberta Teachers' Association Annual Representative Assembly**

Thank you very much for your kind invitation and warm welcome.

And I want to start, Frank, by saying thank you to you. It's been a pleasure working with you over the past year for the good of education in the province. And I have to say more than the past year, because actually we've worked on education issues for much longer than that, but officially for the past year. And I do appreciate all the work that you've put in and the relationship that we've had. I think we've been able to make great strides, and we'll continue to do that thanks to the foundation that you've built. So thank you very much -- I know this is your last ARA, at least as president. You'll probably come back forever as a lifetime delegate or something. But I just want to start by saying thank you.

And thank you to all of you here this morning for the opportunity to address you. Thank you for taking the time on a long weekend to be passionate about education and to be passionate contributors to making the education system better, each in our own way.

I want to acknowledge and say thank you to Keray Henke. Keray is Deputy Minister here, and I mentioned at the last ARA I was at that I had only been at the department a couple of months, and had only started working with Keray. And I can tell you that working with Keray, and through him all the people that I get to have the privilege of working with at the Department of Education -- many of whom of course are teachers who have either come to the department as full time staff or who are seconded to the department -- are very passionate about making education and the education system front and foremost. And it's a real pleasure and privilege to work with Keray. And of course, if you have any real tough questions, Keray and Janice are here to deal with those this morning. [Laughter]

I know that all of you are here because you believe that one of the most fundamentally important things we can do as a society is to educate our young people. And I want to thank you for the passion that you bring to that, and for being such a great team of people. I've had the privilege over the past couple of weeks to phone the 23 recipients of the Excellence in Teaching Awards this year. And just like last year, each one of them as I talk to them says, "I am part of a professional team. I work collaboratively with others. This award is not mine alone."

And I think that really speaks volumes. Because teachers do act in that professional way to say they are part of a professional team of people. And the 23 teachers that receive the Excellence in Teaching Awards this year, as last year, truly represent the thousands of excellent teachers in this province, those that were nominated and weren't nominated for Excellence in Teaching Awards. And yes, they're being singled out because their colleagues have taken the time and effort to do it, and principals and teachers and students, and that's a very special award. But I think it's always telling when you talk to someone who is being singled out for excellence and they point out that they're one of a very very large group of excellent people in the province who care passionately about the future of our province, who care passionately about the future opportunities for our children.

So I want to say thank you for making sure that Alberta's children have those opportunities to find their passions and fulfill their potential. Because only with those opportunities to develop a broad range of knowledge, skills and attributes will our students continue to be among the best in

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the world. And that's important, not so that we can have the bragging rights to say we're the best in the world. It's important because we are increasingly part of a global economy and a global community, and it's important that our students are equipped to play in that global economy and global community.

If there's a silver lining to the current economic situation, it is that it draws attention to how fundamentally important education is to our society.

And educating our young people not only means making sure they know where we came from, but also that they're ready for where we're going. We live in a society that is increasingly part of a global community. It's essential that our children grow up to become citizens of the world and participants that global and local economy.

I had the privilege of going to Seattle before Christmas to attend a conference on education in the future, and then in January to go to the United Kingdom to participate in a similar conference.

The conferences were very affirming. Particularly the conference in London, where there were 69 ministers of education from around the world, gathered talking about the future of education from their perspective.

And while I learned a lot from those conferences, particularly the London conference, about where we could go, what was really affirming was that all of those ministers of education – I would say each and every one of them – was aspiring for what we already have.

That speaks well of our system and it speaks well of you as teachers.

I want to talk about *Inspiring Education* – our *Inspiring Education* dialogue and the future of education, but I know there's a couple of current issues that are top of mind.

So I'll just briefly address those, and maybe later on this afternoon, if you want to catch me specifically about those issues, I'd be happy to go into more detail.

But the first one is with respect to Average Weekly Earnings. As you know, the agreement between the provincial government and teachers indicated that salaries would go up every year on the basis of the increase in average weekly earnings.

You're probably also aware that about the middle of March we learned that Statistics Canada was changing their methodology in terms of how they were calculating the average weekly earnings, and then on March 30, they disclosed the new methodology and used it to recalculate.

So the anticipated and advertised through the ATA newsletter and the schools boards and ourselves – the 4.8 per cent became under the new methodology 5.99 per cent. Our budget had already been put to bed. So at that point all that we could do was sit down with your leadership and the ASBA leadership and agree that this was something that we needed to have us come together to decide how we were going to deal with the change. And in the meantime, I proceeded with the budget, which passed the house last Thursday.

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Of course, if we'd made a change while the budget was in the House, we would have had to introduce a whole new budget, so that wasn't particularly an open question. So where we are now is, I will be going to Treasury Board to get a corporate government position on average weekly earnings. It not only affects our agreement with teachers, it also affects other contracts, it affects how we adjust the increase to the minimum wage in the province now, by policy, and so I need to have a corporate position from government as to what their view is.

There's only three options: one is to say we continue with the methodology that was agreed upon in the first place; we go to the new methodology; or we find some other way to calculate the increase in average weekly earnings, which was the agreement, that the increase will be the increase in average weekly earnings for Albertans.

But I have to go to Treasury Board and Agenda and Priorities and get a corporate position, and then I need to come back to your leadership and the ASBA and deal with how we go forward.

One thing I want to be perfectly clear on is that at the end of March, and throughout the budget process, I have been absolutely clear with school boards across the province: this does not affect their budgeting for teachers. They budget for an increase of 4.8 per cent based on the old methodology, and we provide the increase in funds based on that old methodology. And then when we come to a final determination – whatever that is – if that requires more funds, then we've committed to provide them. The commitment that the Premier made and that I've made is that we will fund that agreement. [Applause.]

Any discussion about there not being enough money in the budget for teacher's salary increases, and therefore I need to cut teacher positions, or reduce, is not on. It should not be there. If the budget is tight for other reasons, and there's lots of reasons the budget might be tight – because we did not agree to fund other contracts; those were agreements the school boards made themselves – but they should not be using the funding for teacher's salaries as a rationale for cutting teacher positions or changes to the teacher workforce.

We will get to a resolution of this on a timely basis, long before implementation on September 1<sup>st</sup>.

The other issue that I know is relatively minor in your minds, but I'll just mention it anyway, and that's Bill 44. [Laughter.]

I want you to hear what my position is straight from me so that you know what I am committed to, and exactly what I have been saying about this legislation.

It's important to be clear about the effect of Bill 44.

It requires school boards to notify parents about classes that deal explicitly with religion, sexuality, or sexual orientation.

It allows parents to opt their children out of those classes.

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That is not a significant change from current practice – parents are already informed about sex education under mandated policy, and given the opportunity to opt out.

Under Section 50 of the [School] Act, parents are entitled to opt out their children out of religious instruction or exercises – and also, incidentally, patriotic instructions and exercises – but there is no obligation for them to be informed in advance.

The new Section 11.1 is intended to apply only to courses whose subject matter primarily deals with religion or sexuality – like World Religions, or perhaps a social studies module on comparative religions.

It certainly does not include evolution.

It does not include looking through a religious lens at every course, or subject matter. It does not deal with the so-called “teachable moments” and spontaneous classroom discussions important to student learning.

Every classroom must continue to be a place of free, open, honest, thoughtful discussion, particularly when that discussion involves a clash of cultures, values, or even religions.

That is not teaching religion.

That’s teaching current events, it’s teaching history, it’s teaching the issues of society, where religion quite often can impact. It’s acknowledging the reality of today's society.

Religion must be discussed if we are to develop students who are global citizens.

Bill 44, as I said, is not intended to allow religious interpretation of non-religious programs of studies as grounds for opting out of instruction – and that is how it should and must be interpreted.

One of the other issues that I want to address is the suggestion that teachers will be hauled before the Human Rights Commission.

One of the tenets of the operating procedures of the Human Rights Commission is to always to require a complainant to first go through other processes that are available to them.

In the school context, those processes have always been there and have worked.

We encourage parents to talk to teachers, not just about these issues, but about any issue in the curriculum that they might have a concern about

The appropriate route is then to talk to you first. Talk to the principal if they have further concerns.

If they still don't get satisfaction, they talk to the school board.

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I'm not personally aware of any circumstances where that process has not used and not been successful.

The notification requirement puts the onus on the school board to provide notice

But I want to be clear: one of the reasons I've been speaking out about this section – because it's not my bill – but one of the reasons I've been speaking out about this section is that, if in fact it needs to be interpreted at some place or at some time, whether the Human Rights Commission or a court, I want to be perfectly clear on the record what the intention of this bill is.

And the intention is not to put a religious lens or a sexual lens on every topic. It's not about whether or not we can find religion or sex in Shakespeare. It's about the explicit teaching of religion and the explicit teaching of human sexuality.

So I'm being clear on the record in the House, I'm being clear on the record on my blog, I'm being clear on the record everywhere that I can speak, that this section has to be interpreted in its narrow sense, not a broad sense, and cannot be used to open up the broad discussion of any religious aspect or sexual aspect in any course of study.

We have very good discussion going on on my blog, and I'd invite you to join that discussion. We post comments that come in, and I try to respond to them. It's not as timely as I might like, but there are other things to do in the day as well. [Laughter.]

Alberta's education system is considered to be among the world's finest, and that's largely because of the depth and breadth of our program of studies and the abilities of our teachers.

I am committed to ensuring that remains the case.

But as confusing, contradictory and confounding as the debate around Bill 44 is, I think that there are some good things that are coming out.

The debate clearly shows that not enough Albertans have been engaged in the discussion about what our K-12 system is designed to do; the important societal role that teachers in classrooms play in making sure that our children are ready to take their place as global and local citizens; and there's also not a clear understanding of what is mandated in the *School Act* and in the policies that operate under that act.

So on the positive side, we have seen very clearly that Albertans of all stripes care about the quality of our education system, and how it's made up.

Both of those things make the success of the *Inspiring Education* initiative that we are undertaking extremely important.

We need to better engage the public – both parents and non-parents alike – in determining the path education will follow in the next 20 years.

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*Inspiring Education* isn't about today's concerns, what we've done wrong, or what we could have done better.

It's about what we need for the education system in the future.

It's worth remembering that we didn't invent this education system.

We inherited the basis of it and we've worked on improving it.

Why do we have 50 minute or 55 minute periods, or time blocks like that?

Well, because in 1912, Ford did an efficiency study and found that was the optimal length of time to retain attention.

Why do we have bells?

Well, that was developed as part of the industrial process – ringing bells for a shift change or a lunch break.

It's not by chance that we segment educational instruction into one class for mathematics or one class for language arts, and so on.

That type of segmentation is really no different from segmentation on industrial assembly lines.

We've done away with many of the attributes of that kind of system over the years, but we're still bending and shaping a system which we did not design.

We have summer breaks because the kids after all are needed back on the farm, for the summer.

And I think we all know that if we continue to modify the current system, we'll not necessarily meet the needs of learners to come.

None of us wants our children to be left behind when we need to succeed in a rapidly changing, highly technological and more demanding world.

So *Inspiring Education* is not about curriculum design, classroom size or teaching methods.

It's about deciding what an educated Albertan will need to look like 20 years from now.

And to do that, we need to engage across the broadest cross-section of the population possible.

We must always remember that education in Alberta exists not only for the sake of our students, but for sake of our society.

And as you and I know, building public confidence in education is extremely important to its success.

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All of you have a pivotal role in determining the best routes to follow in getting there. The role that you play in education and the education system is essential. You have a crucial role in helping ensure that our communities are connected and engaged in education. Without that community value and support, that appreciation for education, we won’t be totally successful.

We want to get our graduation rates up, our high school completion rates up – we will never be successful in that unless our society and our parents value education.

This is the way we will build even greater support for our system and for our teachers.

So we have three defined outcomes for the dialogue: an enhanced awareness and appreciation for education; a clear understanding of what it will mean to be an educated Albertan twenty years from now; and a policy framework that will guide the sector and inform legislation (and we do intend to bring forward either revisions to or a new *School Act* coming out of that process).

So what do you think an educated person will look like 20 years from now? What abilities and skills will they need? These are the questions we are asking all our stakeholders, as well as the general public.

I know that I’m going on far longer than I was asked to, so I’ll end here.

First of all, I’d like to specifically thank Dennis Theobald, who is the ATA representative on the *Inspiring Education* Working Committee, for helping to shape this discussion and bring it forward.

I’d like to thank the ATA, and Frank as President of the ATA, for the support in terms of communicating the initiative and encouraging people to get involved.

And I’d like to encourage each and every one of you to participate in the community conversations, or the online discussions, or in any way you can. In the conference in the fall, we need a teacher voice at the table talking about the future of education, that goes without saying.

And I know you’re interested because, “The Future: It’s Why Teachers Teach.”

And I thank you for your passion, your time, your interest in education.

[Applause.]