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The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Oral Question Period
November 23, 2011
Funding for Private Schools

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, this summer when the now Premier was stumping for her new position, she participated in an educational debate where she said the following: what I am quite concerned about right now is that we could very well see, with the continuing development of private and charter schools, the public system being a second-tier level of education, and that can't happen. To the Minister of Education: since you became minister, has the Premier had a chance to indicate to you this concern, that she previously discussed in the debate at the Alberta Teachers' Association summer meetings?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, obviously the Premier, like myself and any other parent, is concerned about making sure we have the best education possible. Every parent as a partner in education wants to make sure their children receive the best education possible. You know what, Mr. Speaker? A little bit of bad news. I said already in this House that the Prime Minister of the U.K. just told us that Alberta has the best system of education in the entire English-speaking world, and he was referring to the public system. Yes, we do have private schools and charter schools and Christian schools and Islamic schools. The list goes on and on. Altogether that's what makes Alberta Education so great.

Mr. Hehr: To the same minister. Given the Premier's words can the minister explain why this government is currently subsidizing some elite private schools, some that charge parents up to \$17,000 a year, with provincial tax dollars?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, again, as I said, that's what makes Alberta Education so fabulous. This member would like to misrepresent private schools. As a matter of fact, the majority of private schools are not elitist. I have a private school in my riding, the Islamic Academy, where I would venture to guess that the average income of the parents could possibly be below the provincial average. We want choice for parents. We want choice for children. Children learn differently. Parents have different values and different expectations. In Alberta we offer a full buffet of education that suits everybody's needs.

Mr. Hehr: Given that my previous example makes it clear that in the main the average working family cannot afford private schooling, will this minister take the Premier's words to heart and look at cutting funding to private schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, the answer is simply no. Again, what this member is doing is misinterpreting what the Premier may have said. The fact is that I know of private schools – I have private schools in my riding – where, as I said earlier, the majority of children in that school are children of immigrants. The average income is probably below the provincial average. To misinterpret the reality of private schools is simply wrong. Our kids deserve choice. Our parents deserve choice. They deserve the best education possible, and they're getting it.

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Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, government should support equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity is the principle that whether you're born into a rich family or a poor family, you'll have the opportunity to succeed. This is a cornerstone of any democratic, equitable society. The way governments ensure equality of opportunity is through a publicly funded and delivered education system. To the Minister of Education. Given that the Premier stated that she is concerned with the continuing development of private and charter schools and that because of these the public system is at risk of being a second-tier level of education, how is the minister going to ensure that this does not happen?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, our Premier, like me and everybody on this side of the House, we are committed to a public education system. But we are also committed to choice. The problem is what we're hearing from the other side, this member for the last three days going out of his way trying to characterize private schools as elitist and only for the rich. As a matter of fact, that's not the case. We have Sikh schools both in Edmonton and Calgary. We have Islamic academies in Edmonton. We have many private schools that do not cater to the rich, do not cater to the elite of Alberta but simply cater to parents who want to exercise choice.

Mr. Hehr: To the same minister: given the Premier's concerns about the continuing development of private and charter schools what is this minister doing to address this situation given that we are creating a system that divides the wealthy from the poor and the religious from the secular? Does the minister understand that this is not developing an inclusive system?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, this member should be less concerned about the Premier's concerns and be more concerned about facts because he is as far away from facts as he possibly can be. As you know, Mr. Speaker, it's not a secret. It's a world-known fact that Alberta education is in the ranks of the top five always and usually the top three. Finland and Korea and Alberta, not Canada but Alberta, usually are the countries considered to be the leaders in education and partly because of the fact that we have choice. I choose to send my daughter to a Catholic school system. You may choose to send your children to public. Another person can send them to a charter, and the list goes on.

Mr. Hehr: Given that this government divides our children by funding private schools with public funds up to \$127 million a year, will the minister cut public funding to private schools in order to act on the Premier's concerns about the continued growth of private and charter schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Again, concerned about the Premier's concerns and not concerned about the facts. Mr. Speaker, we fund private schools only at a rate of some 70 per cent of regular funding. They build their own infrastructure. One could actually argue, if you want to use the twisted logic of the opposition, the fact that the private schools subsidize public schools because kids go to school and we don't have to pay for the infrastructure.