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| Colombie-Britannique | 39e | 1e | Discours sur l’éducation | 25 novembre 2009 | Michelle Stilwell | Minister of Education | British Columbia Liberal Party |

It's my pleasure today to rise to introduce the estimates for the Ministry of Education. As I indicated in my opening remarks during the estimates of the Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, I say this both because of the important role of the public services this ministry provides in the lives of British Columbians and because the debating of estimates has such an important place in our parliamentary heritage.

It is a rare honour for me to participate in an exercise in democracy whose origins reach back to the Magna Carta in 1225. The section of the Magna Carta reading, "No scutage nor aid shall be levied…without the common counsel of our kingdom," was used by the English parliaments as a departure point for increasing their authority over taxation and spending in exchange for providing kings of England with a means to wage war in France.

Here we are today, 784 years later, the heirs to this wonderful system of providing the means not to conduct dynastic wars with our neighbours but to provide public goods and services to British Columbians.

I would like to introduce the Ministry of Education staff members who work for the people of British Columbia and who are here to help me respond to the questions. They are: James Gorman, deputy minister; Keith Miller, assistant deputy minister, resource management division; Paige MacFarlane, assistant deputy minister, partnerships and planning division; Renate Butterfield, assistant deputy minister, knowledge management division; and Rick Davis, superintendent, achievement division.

We also have additional staff members who are available should we need them, including Peter Owen, assistant deputy minister, governance and accountability division; Sherri Mohoruk, superintendent, liaison division; Pat Brown, executive director, senior finance officer, finance and administrative services branch; Susan Kennedy, executive director, diversity, equity and early learning.

This past August the Speech from the Throne addressed the challenging fiscal realities we currently face and outlined the direction we must take in order to strengthen our economy for the future generations of British Columbians. The September Budget Update set out the commitments that will carry us through the current global recession and on to new levels of prosperity.

Our vision for the future will not be realized through a quick fix. It will require that difficult decisions be made and that discretionary spending be reduced in order to not risk creating a financial burden that would be carried by our children and our grandchildren.

We are working to minimize non-essential spending and find ways to be more effective. At the same time we are working to protect the vital health care and education services that British Columbians rely on.

There is no better investment we can make toward B.C.'s long-term health and stability than to invest in the education of our children. Today's students are the workers, innovators, leaders and citizens of tomorrow. That's why we are focusing our efforts to raise graduation rates and improve student performance from the earliest years and why we have placed an increased emphasis on early learning and early childhood development that will set young learners on the road to success.

It's why we are working to link schools more palpably into the framework of the communities they serve, why we are involved in new strategies to create more inclusive, culturally relevant learning opportunities for B.C.'s aboriginal students and why we are using the opportunities presented by the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games and Paralympic Games to engage all our students in this once-in-a-lifetime learning experience.

We are fortunate in this province to have one of the best education systems in the world. We must continue to support that education system to ensure that we reach our goal of becoming the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction in North America.

Though K-to-12 enrolment has declined by an estimated 60,000 students since 2001, funding in education has risen steadily. At more than $4.5 billion, we are now providing optimal and one of the highest fundings to school districts ever in this province.

The budget update tabled in September lays out a further increase of $84 million in operating funding for 2009-10. Per pupil funding is increased for the ninth straight year, going up by $205 to an estimated $8,323 for 2009-10. Budget Update 2009 ensures that we have the resources to protect the world-class level of British Columbia's K-to-12 education.

We are working towards a brighter future that involves new approaches to benefit our youngest learners. Government has committed $151 million over two years to implement full-day kindergarten for five-year-olds in British Columbia. Starting in September 2010, full-day kindergarten will be available for half of all kindergarten-aged children. Full-day kindergarten will be available to every five-year-old starting school in our province in 2011.

In the meantime we're continuing to expand our StrongStart B.C. centres, which are preparing early learners for success before they even reach school. We've invested $43 million to expand this invaluable program, and we now have more than 300 centres serving early learners and their caregivers in communities all across British Columbia.

This government has a vision for school facilities in British Columbia. It is a vision that will see schools and community organizations partner to create neighbourhood learning centres where people can access educational and community services under one roof.

Nine model neighbourhood learning centres are being developed in six districts throughout the province, and more schools are looking for ways to incorporate community elements into their school construction projects. The first two neighbourhood learning centres in Revelstoke will include a community centre, coordinated health services for vulnerable teens, an early learning hub and medical services.

We believe in vibrant, connected communities that are socially responsive and environmentally sustainable. Neighbourhood learning centres support our commitment to see that schools and school lands are used for the maximum public benefit.

The government is committed to working with school districts and aboriginal communities to help improve educational outcomes and grant increased educational opportunities for all B.C. students. Working with our partners, we are involved in new strategies to create more inclusive, culturally relevant learning opportunities for B.C.'s aboriginal students. We have developed courses that help to increase awareness of aboriginal world views and create greater understanding of aboriginal student identities.

Aboriginal education enhancement agreements between school districts, local aboriginal communities and the Ministry of Education are helping to ensure that aboriginal culture is integrated in public schools. To date, B.C. has signed 45 enhancement agreements, and more are coming.

Aboriginal students have made important gains, but there is still more work to be done. We are working to develop ways of sharing information between public schools and first nation band schools in order to improve overall communication and our service to individual students throughout the province.

This school year in British Columbia is one of considerable historical significance as we play host to the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. The games are creating many opportunities for British Columbia. They're bringing investment and tourism, while showcasing the successes and possibilities of this great province. Students are taking part in the excitement, and educators are using the opportunities presented by the games to engage those students in an educational experience they will remember for the rest of their lives.

Despite the fiscal challenges we currently face, there is much to be optimistic about. Through the vision of the throne speech and support of the Budget Update 2009, we are not only protecting but also improving educational services for all British Columbians.

As we examine and discuss the items in this budget, we must look at each item as a step on the road to ensuring the legacy we leave behind for future British Columbians. Education lays the groundwork for our province's success, and this budget is the path we must follow in order to realize our goal of building a stronger B.C.