

From Insight into government 39-4

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STANDING POLICY COMMITTEES

Committees of Tory MLAs that hear and review proposals from interest groups.

EDUCATION: On the second language program

● A presentation by the Coalition For Equal Access To Education to the Standing Policy Committee on Learning & Employment. Presenters: Hieu Van Ngo, Cesar Agudelo, Amal Umar, Andrea Marquez, and Beth Chatten. Observing: A capacity crowd, including former ND MLA Jim Gurnett, now with the Mennonite Centre For Newcomers.

For a copy of the written presentation *Toward Innovative Vision For Quality, Equitable ESL Education* or for information, phone 403.261.5939 or fax 403.261.5992.

This umbrella group of agencies and communities asks the province to address what it sees as "institutional barriers" to the equitable delivery of English As A Second Language (ESL) programs in Alberta.

The presenters were nearly all immigrants and former

High drop-out rate, low academic achievement by ESL students in Alberta

ESL students in Alberta. They expressed the hope of better lives for themselves and their families and children in Canada, and said ESL programs were a big part of that.

In its background submission, the Coalition says the highest dropout rates in Alberta are among ESL students: 61%-74% compared to the provincial average of 34%. Academic achievement of ESL students is on average significantly lower

than English speakers. ESL learners require 5-7 years of "structured, direct ESL support" by specialized teachers to acquire "academic language proficiency." Many ESL students also have "complex social and psychological needs."

There are about 36,000 "identified" ESL students in Alberta. In 2001, 30% of 16,290 immigrants settling in Alberta were under the age of 19 (ESL funding age cap) and only 12.5% identified English as their primary language.

The Coalition wants ESL programs recognized as a subject, like other languages, rather than continue as a "support service." This would ensure "mandated funding, curriculum, instructional hours, hiring and deployment of professionally trained ESL teachers."

If Alberta Learning won't designate ESL as a subject, the presenters say a significant increase in ESL funding is required to pay for professionally-trained teachers. No

figures were given. They also want ESL funding provided to Kindergarten to provide immigrant children with a "head start." The group also advocates lifting the age cap (19) for ESL support as "traditional timelines for schooling are not suitable for the changing student population."

MLA reaction: There were positive and encouraging comments but no questions about implementing the requested changes in ESL, or about funding. Shiraz Shariff (PC, Calgary McCall) made an unusual plea to support for the recommendations. "This is one area where the Alberta Advantage has failed," Shariff said, citing a 40% high school drop-out rate among ESL students. He said the issue "needs to be taken to the next stages," and said he would urge Learning Minister Lyle Oberg to adopt the group's recommendations when the committee returned to private session.

SPC Chair Denis Herard (PC, Calgary Egmont) mildly pointed out that Shariff had made a speech, rather than asking questions. The Learning Minister said the presentation was one of the best he'd seen in a long time, but said at this time he "can't go into a lot of the things" the presenters had brought up. He promised to contact the presenters and jokingly indicated he is so impressed with the presenters they are welcome to jobs in his department. Oberg asked no specific questions to the group.

HEALTH: A report on the Heart Health Project ...

● A presentation by the Centre For Health Promotion Studies at the University of Alberta to the SPC on Health & Community Living. Presenters: Dr. Kim Raine; Cynthia Smith. Information from the Centre at phone 780.492.1586 or fax 780.492.9579.

The Centre for Health Promotion Studies was set up at the University of Alberta with \$600,000 in start-up funding from Alberta Health & Wellness and Alberta Learning in 1996 and 1999. In 2000, Alberta Learning provided \$340,000 a year for the Centre's graduate programs.

The Centre's purpose is "interdisciplinary research and graduate education to advance knowledge and theory development, practice and policy in health promotion." The presenters say it has generated \$16 million in research grants and has had 65 individuals complete graduate studies (23 more this year).

The presentation focused on the Centre's Alberta Heart Health Project, set up as part of an interprovincial effort in 1989. The project is now in its "Dissemination Phase" to study the "organization capacity (will, infrastructure and leadership)" of Alberta's regional health authorities to "use health promotion knowledge to take action against major (heart) risk factors." It "secured" 5 years of joint funding (1999-2004) for the project from Alberta Health and from the Canadian Institute of Health Research. The goal of this phase of the project "is building capacity for health promotion in Alberta's RHAs."

The presentation was a request for continued government funding for the Heart Health Project (no numbers