

**SPEAKING NOTES
HONOURABLE RON LIEPERT
MINISTER OF ALBERTA EDUCATION**

**ASBA FALL GENERAL MEETING
M.L.A. BREAKFAST**

NOVEMBER 20, 2007

8:00 AM – 9:00 AM

**WESTIN HOTEL
EDMONTON**

Good morning and thank you for inviting me and my colleagues from the Legislature today.

It's good to see so many of them interested in education and talking to their locally elected trustees.

I can say with some conviction they didn't come to hear me speak.

When I am asked to speak at a conference like this, I always wonder what the audience really wants me to talk about.

Based on casual discussions Sunday night I don't think that's the case today.

I think I've got a pretty good idea of what you want me to talk about

And I'll do that.

But first there are a couple of other things I want to mention before I do.

First, again congratulations on your 100th anniversary.

As I said Sunday we really are heading into a new era in education in Alberta.

100 years is a significant milestone and much of the success of our K-12 system in Alberta is in large part due to the commitment and hard work of each of you and past members.

I also want to congratulate those of you who are new trustees.

Thank you for offering your services for the betterment of education in Alberta.

I was a newly elected official three years ago.

It can be daunting and frankly quite overwhelming but there have been a few things I have learned and if you don't mind I would like to pass them on;

- 1) Listen a lot
- 2) Save your comments for the really important subjects
- 3) Don't be afraid to ask questions and challenge the status quo from time to time
- 4) Be prepared to be swayed in your opinion and shift perspectives when required
- 5) Always represent the views of the majority of your constituents.

For those of you re-elected or acclaimed on October 14th, I look forward to continue working with you and meeting with your newly elected boards in your district in the next two months – important to meet in our community.

I want to pause for a moment and pay tribute to your outgoing President Maureen Kubinec.

I have had the privilege of working with Maureen for the past 11 months.

Maureen has been a terrific advocate for your association.

One of the things I have learned in dealing with her is that she isn't afraid to make her views known... but she does it in such a nice way.

It's hard to challenge her when she makes those views known.

I really value those traits and I'm not sure just how yet but I want to continue to use Maureen's knowledge and wisdom at the provincial level.

Secondly, I want to mention briefly a subject matter that has been raised with me consistently throughout the summer months and that is Bill 1, *The Lobbyists Act*.

I know that many of you were concerned about representatives of school boards being classified as lobbyists.

The standing committee of the legislature has recommended removal of your organization from that category which I know will be good news.

And as I mentioned earlier, a number of my colleagues from the Legislature are here this morning and you can thank them personally for listening to your representations.

And now onto the topic, which judging by discussions at the opening reception Sunday night, is on most of your minds – the Memorandum of Agreement in principle on the Teacher's Unfunded Pension Liability.

What it proposes is 5 years of labour peace in exchange for government assuming the \$2 billion liability is in the simplest of terms, good news for education in Alberta.

Some constituents and members of the media have asked – Why did government do that?

I think it is worth remembering who we are here to serve.

It's the children of Alberta.

And what is good for them must always guide what we do.

An unhappy workforce is not a productive workforce.

A combative workforce is not an innovative workforce.

A disillusioned workforce is not an engaged workforce.

Though teachers are not your entire workforce, their attitudes and actions set the environment for all staff.

And since it is that workforce on whom we rely to give our children the best possible education, I believe the children of Alberta will be the major beneficiary of the Memorandum of Understanding that we announced last Thursday.

One or two of you have mentioned to me that the School Boards Association should have been at the table during the negotiations.

While I understand that position - I need to point out that I was also not part of the negotiations and neither was the head of the ATA.

The plan was to keep politics out of the negotiations.

We have been there before.

And planting the same kind of tree always produces the same kind of fruit.

If we had taken the standard approach, I think we would still be at the table and the discussions would have dragged on for months and it is unlikely we would have resolved the issue.

We needed to do something new.

Fifty years of following the same approach had produced nothing but frustration.

We needed a 21st century approach to solving a 20th century problem.

The complexity of the issue and the hard feelings it had created in all parties involved cannot be underestimated.

If you want to see what it took just to determine the reasonable options that were available, take a look at the report of the Task Force on the Teacher's Unfunded Pension Liability.

It's available on the Alberta Education website.

There was no doubt in my mind that we needed to create a climate in which value-exchange was the order of the day.

Both sides had to be willing to give up something in order to get something they wanted.

From the government's point of view there was also an invisible participant in the discussions – the Alberta taxpayer, you and me.

We not only wanted to arrive at a solution – we needed one that showed good stewardship of taxpayer dollars and a clear benefit to the province as a whole.

So we are proposing to assume the teacher's portion of the unfunded liability in return for five-years of labour peace.

I've only experienced one strike this past 11 months and it wasn't pleasant.

- Parents were unhappy,
- students were not being educated,
- teachers didn't really want to be on strike
- and I can assure you it was the longest 4 weeks ever for those trustees.

Approval of the deal will also allow government to refinance the total unfunded liability and potentially save the Alberta taxpayer billions of dollars over the next several decades.

We recognize each of the 62 school boards still need to sign collective agreements – but we believe that task has been made much less difficult by the fact the truly contentious issues are off the table.

I know we have created a very tight timeline with the January 31 target but our negotiating teams managed to arrive at the memorandum of agreement in about the same amount of time.

Many of you have told me that labour negotiations take up far too much of your time and energy and distract you from the real business of education.

In talking to many of you Sunday night, I get the sense you are eager to move on.

Now some of you have asked me about a letter from the Premier that is part of the proposed agreement.

It provides assurances in a couple of areas.

It states that there will be no legislative changes that would affect the working conditions of teachers during the period the agreement is in effect.

To be frank, the need to offer these assurances was indicative of the relationship between the government and the ATA.

In essence, the Premier's letter shows that we are acting in good faith and will continue to do so.

The agreement also creates a consultation committee with the ATA

and does not preclude setting up a similar committee with ASBA

which would make sure your concerns also continue to be heard.

So I believe, that pending approval by all boards and ATA locals, an elephant has been removed from the room.

But as we move one elephant out the door another plunks herself down – I'm referring to infrastructure.

It is all of your concerns, trust me I know, I've heard it time and time again.

First let me point out that we are not standing still.

Our total infrastructure budget for education this year now exceeds \$600 million, which includes some \$200 million announced this fall for modernization.

New schools are being opened and older schools are being modernized.

We announced the 18 schools P3 project in June for Edmonton and Calgary and that is proceeding nicely.

We are now at the Request for Qualifications stage, sort of a casting call for interested parties, and that will close at the end of this month.

I'm told interest in the project is higher than first anticipated.

Many of you benefited from the modernization announcements this fall.

I can't explain what it means to be in Innisfree and see local school officials in tears of joy because finally there is a commitment to replace that old school.

In saying that I also realize the situation in Whitecourt, Sexsmith, Bow Island and just about everywhere else in the province.

But there is a plan, and it will become evident in the coming months.

In his television address at the end of October, the Premier stated he had two more pieces of unfinished business – teachers' pension liability and a 20 year capital plan.

Well, I've been working on a 5 year project specific plan with additional projections for 10 years but it appears now our officials will have to double their efforts.

I can assure you the education capital plans, based on your priorities, have been taken through our capital planning process and are awaiting final decisions from caucus.

When it comes to capital planning, I believe it is important that you know exactly what it is that is being proposed for your jurisdiction for the next five years.

That is my commitment to you today.

We will layout exactly what is proposed for the next 5 years.

The third issue that always comes up is predictable ongoing funding.

I know those of you who are returning trustees spent a lot of agonizing hours this past year trying to figure out how to make a 3% operational grant work in a 6% inflationary economy or at least that's what you kept telling me.

Well I trust that the plan is a little more clear now.

It was always our intention to get the unfunded liability question off the table.

I mentioned earlier that the taxpayer needed to see some benefit in such a deal.

I think a 3% increase in salary for teachers this year, when most others in the public sector are receiving 6 to 8 %, is fair to the taxpayer.

I understand each of you has other cost pressures such as teacher grid movement that needs to be taken into consideration.

Our 3 year business plan released last spring projected future operating grants at 3%.

We now know that won't cut it next year, but another benefit of the memorandum of understanding is our commitment to fund teachers salary increases based on weekly average earnings of the previous year.

That may not be the ideal predictable funding model but it certainly will go a long way toward meeting those objectives.

Like everything else at budget time however nothing is confirmed until the Finance Minister stands up in the Legislature next February 14th.

So I am optimistic that within three months, if all goes according to plan, the elephants will be out of the room and we can get back to doing what I said at the beginning we are all here for – educating the children of Alberta.

We have opened the door that can lead us toward our common goal – creating an educational system that best meets the needs of the 21st century learner.

We have one of the best K-12 education systems in the world, let's all work toward not resting on those laurels but striving to make it even better.

The real question we are all facing is how to do that?

How do we ensure Alberta's K-12 system leads the way in meeting the needs of the 21st century learner?

There are things that we have to start doing now if we are going to meet that goal.

And it is those things I want to work with you on.

We need to find answers to some very important educational questions.

How do we develop transferable skills in our students, skills that will benefit them as they change jobs and careers?

We need to be prepared to accept new models for delivering those skills to students.

How do we truly create the independent and versatile thinkers the 21st century demands?

How do we take life-long learning from an educational concept to a student reality?

How can we use technology to its best effect given Alberta's increasingly diverse population?

The growing trend is toward student laptop use allowing for greater access to online learning opportunities.

I know many of you are familiar with our one-to-one Emerge pilot project and we look forward to the results of that.

How do we make our schools the safe and caring places they must be for our students without turning our entrance ways into something similar to airport line security?

Which brings to me how do we fully engage parents and the community in the education of our children?

All of you became trustees because you wanted to make a real difference in education.

Being contract negotiators has been getting in the way of that.

With the proposed agreement in place we will have the opportunity to do just that.

So let's leave the past behind us and move forward to the future we all want.

A new era for education in Alberta.

The children of Alberta are depending on us.

Thank you.