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| Ontario | 30e | 3e | Discours sur l’éducation | 3 juin 1976 | Thomas Wells | Minister of Education | Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario |

Mr. Chairman, I would like to begin by saying that if ever in the history of Ontario there was a critical need for a better sense of perspective on the school system of the province, a need to stand back and at a distance objectively analyse the realities of the present day, it is now.

There could be no more opportune time for at least a cursory review than this moment as we are here today to examine the proposed expenditures of $1,970,456,000 by the Ministry of Education for the fiscal year 1976-1977.

Almost everywhere across North America education has come under the shadow of negativism over the past four or five years. Every week we seem to hear criticisms from those who claim there are falling standards, shortcomings in teaching the basics, a lack of discipline, not enough compulsory subjects, a lack of tough examinations, too many teacher strikes, inadequate financing, higher education taxes and on and on it goes. In general, less quality for more money, or so the critics say.

It is a small comfort for most of us to open a daily newspaper from virtually any North American city, I would say, and realize that the criticisms we are hearing here in Ontario are practically universal. At least, we can realize that Ontario is not an island and that educators and legislators almost everywhere are pondering the same questions we are.

How much validity is there to the criticism? How can we objectively measure the quality of education better than it is being done at present? How, precisely, do we overcome any shortcomings which do not exist without destroying what is essentially a fine education system?

In short, where do we go from here? In education today, we face a paradoxical situation and I say we need a sense of perspective to recognize it. The paradox is simply this-many of the features of our school system; which are being most heavily criticized today are the very things which were achieved in the 1960s when everywhere there was a great push, supported by educators and the public alike, to break away from the rigidities and authoritarianism of the 1950s and earlier.

I believe that in some respects the pendulum of change in education perhaps did swing too far during the 1960s because of the momentum behind it. Today, in 1976, the onus is upon us to keep a rein on the pendulum, letting it return perhaps a little closer to a more balanced position but preventing it from sweeping back too far.

It is incumbent upon legislators, educators and the public not to rush forward into wholesale changes that may in the process destroy the best of what has been achieved over these past 15 years. In almost every respect there has been progress and improvement in education since 1960.

The responsible-and perhaps, Mr.; Chairman, the most difficult for us today is to assess with special care the criticisms and recommendations we are hearing, to pinpoint those with real merit, and substance and at the same time resist: the temptation to accede to others just for the sake of silencing the criticism.

We must make changes. We must make them soon. Personally I don't believe that the needed refinements are nearly so substantive as some of the extremist critics would have us believe. The cool hand of reason must prevail, even under the sometimes-intense heat of criticism. We must make those refinements that are educationally sound and no others.

What are some of the key areas that deserve our particular attention at this time, Mr. Chairman?

One, mast certainly, is money. And this is very definitely one critical area where many people within education itself need a better sense of perspective and reality.

We still hear the occasional claim that more money would somehow automatically lead to improvements in education. I think, Mr. Chairman, we have to realize that this is not so, this is not so. We have to realize that the answer to even better quality in education does not lie in ever-increasing amounts of money.

We have before us today expenditure proposals of over $1.9 billion for the Ministry of Education in 1976-1977. Following the pattern Of earlier years, the vast majority of these funds merely pass through Our hands an their way to other bodies and other agencies. In fact 96.6 per cent of the money represented by these estimates today, is for transfer payments to school boards, the Teachers' Superannuation Commission and fund, and to agencies like the Ontario Institute far Studies in Education, the Ontario Educational Communications Authority and several Others.

The remaining expenditures, under five per cent of our total budget, are composed of three types of casts: The first is far the operations of institutions, representing 1.4 per cent of the total ministry estimates. These include the provincial schools for the blind and deaf; developmental centre schools; our correspondence course programme; and the Ontario Teacher Education College. Second, the regional offices of the ministry, which represent 0.6 per cent of the estimates of this ministry. And third, the-if I could term them so-head office costs, of which the regional offices are part but I have separated them for clarity today. The head office costs-that is the cost of the operation here in the Mowat Block at Queen's Park-represents 1.4 per cent of the total estimates of this ministry. These last three items together have decreased slightly during the 1975-1976 fiscal year as a percentage of the total ministry budget, falling now to 3.4 per cent from four per cent last year.

It's well known that the government is constantly under pressure from various quarters, of course, to pump even mare money into education. For reasons that have been expounded many times previously and which are well known to everyone in the Legislature, the proposed increases in transfer payments for next year is the limit which can be afforded within the provincial Treasury.

I spoke earlier of perspective; many members are aware of a study of Canadian education conducted recently by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development-OECD in short which is an international body based in Paris, France. From a draft report arising from this study came same findings that must surely cast a new light and the credibility of those who would have us believe that education in Ontario is under-financed. To quote from that report, there are these words: "In international perspective, Canada's allocations of resources to education have developed from a clearly generous level to an extraordinarily generous one."

The report gives figures, which indicate that Canada's spending in education, expressed in terms of percentages of gross national product, is significantly higher than other major countries of the world. The figures quoted in the report indicate that Canada spends 8.3 per cent of the GNP on education. The closest comparative figures are 7.3 per cent for the USSR; 6.3 per cent for the United States; 'and 5.6 per cent for the United Kingdom. Canada's 8.3 per cent stands at about twice the level of France, which is at 4.5 per cent, Japan at 4 per cent and West Germany at 3.6 per cent.

It is my perception that people are now coming to grips with the reality of education finance in Ontario. It's not been easy. While perhaps there will never be enough money available from the public purse to do everything that everyone would like to do in education, or, for that matter, .in any other field, I believe that those responsible for setting education budgets at all levels today realize that there are limits. Certainly, the public realizes the limits. Although it is extremely difficult, in many cases, to sort out priorities and make those ultimate decisions on how the available money is to be spent, it is being done with a truly commendable degree of persistence, patience, understanding and success.

I believe that we're finally arriving at an improved sense of perspective related to the monetary aspects of our school system.

The second major area that requires careful attention at this time-and I guess it is ultimately more important than the monetary aspects-is the curriculum in our schools. Being at the very heart of the education system, it is not to be tampered with lightly or without great care and serious thought. Yet because of its very nature it must be modified and refined constantly to ensure that it continues to serve the best interests of pupils and society as a whole.

The paradoxical situation, which I described earlier, in which some of the very advances of the 1960s have become the targets of the harshest criticisms of today, certainly presents legislators and educators with a reality that contains a most difficult challenge.

First, let me say that some of the criticisms we have been hearing do have some measure of foundation and we must and will act to make improvements where they are needed. But at the same time I would repeat what I said earlier-that we must not rush headlong into wholesale changes for the sake of expediency because if we do so we run a risk of destroying much of the good that so many people have worked so hard to achieve in recent years in order to make our school system more relevant and more responsive to most of the young people in this province that it must serve.

At the elementary school level, the introduction of "The Formative Years," which is the ministry's official curriculum policy for the primary and junior grades, has exemplified, I believe, the responsible approach to curriculum refinement. In an atmosphere in which many citizens and even some teachers were expressing uneasiness about coverage of the so-called basic subjects there might have been a temptation to retreat to the rigid approaches of a bygone time. We have not done this. Instead, we have prepared for the schools and school boards in "The Formative Years" a clear outline of curriculum expectations, a blueprint of objectives that leaves no room for doubt as to where the emphasis should be in the elementary school system of this province. We gave no thought to the idea of returning to a standardized lockstep curriculum even in the basics because such an approach does not make adequate allowance for the individual differences among children and we must make adequate allowance for these differences. We continue to be convinced that individual school boards, schools and teachers need some degree of flexibility in order to best serve all their pupils and while "The Formative Years" is significantly more clear-cut and succinct than its predecessor, the local curriculum flexibility remains.

The co-operative approach to assessing and refining the elementary school curriculum, which has followed and, in fact, preceded the introduction of "The Formative Years," I think, exemplifies a responsible approach to change in curriculum.

All across this province, hundreds of meetings and workshops have been held over the last year, with local educators and ministry officials working together to assess present curriculum in the schools against the objectives stated in "The Formative Years." Every school board has a plan of action worked out to identify curriculum areas that need change or upgrading and to make appropriate refinements where they're necessary. It should be noted that the comparisons that were made between the present curriculum policies of many local school boards and those stated in 'The Formative Years," where the basics definitely were emphasized, did not reveal too many disparities. Improvements and new emphasis, yes. Some new content, yes. But really they showed that basics were in the school system.

"The Formative Years" stresses again the basics, and so do the programmes that are being offered across this province today. "The Formative Years" paints a picture of curriculum, however, that goes well beyond the basics-the reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar and spelling-which are so necessary. It paints a picture that goes beyond this and presents programmes offered to satisfy other basic objectives, which, of course, must also be the objectives of the elementary school.

While on the topic of curriculum, let me briefly make one or two points about the secondary schools in Ontario and the credit system. To start with, let's look at the core curriculum in our high schools. We have all heard some pretty emotional rhetoric on this subject; much of it, I must say, bears little relation to what is actually happening in our schools.

There are those who seem determined to perpetuate the myth that there is no core curriculum in our high schools. I can only suggest that they take an honest look at the present practice in virtually all the secondary schools across this province. All of the rhetoric aside, the hard statistics show that, .in fact, a basic core curriculum does exist. English and Canadian studies are mandatory for every student. In grades 9 and 10, 100 per cent of the students are taking science, 83 per cent are taking physical education and more than 80 per cent are taking mathematics. In the upper grades, just about every student takes English, maths and science. We have a computerized document of every course being taken by every student in this province, and this document documents what I have said. It's very interesting reading for anyone who believes that the majority of students in this province are taking Mickey Mouse courses or courses like basket-weaving. In fact, I can't even find basket weaving listed as a course of study in any school in this province.

Mr. Chairman, most of the impassioned pleas for a more rigid and authoritarian mandatory core curriculum are implying, if not stating very specifically, that the Ministry of Education ought to lay down a specific list of courses that are compulsory for every student and return to the very rigidity that was so soundly and understandably criticized; in the 1960s as being quite insensitive Ito the individual needs of individual students and the realities of a changing world.

Our policy on core curriculum is quite clear, quite simple and quite realistic, and it is geared to what we believe to be the best interests of the students of this province.

We believe in the core curriculum. We believe that knowledge in certain subjects is fundamental to the education of secondary school students. But we also believe that the high school curriculum should not be prescribed totally from above, from the Ministry of Education. Just as with "The Formative Years" for the elementary schools of the province, we believe there should be flexibility for local school boards and schools so they can respond more individually to the real needs of the students in their jurisdictions.

In curriculum, Mr. Chairman, we are practising local autonomy, the kind of local autonomy that my friend is always talking about and that the Liberal Party is always talking about, local autonomy that allows local people to make decisions.

And we are expecting local responsibility. We establish broad policies and guidelines within which local school boards and educators can bring their own good judgement to bear on specific courses of study. Sometimes I think it would be much easier if we simply reverted to a more centralized and authoritarian system, taking away the flexibility and directing more of everything right here from Queen's Park-just as in the "good old days" which we hear so much about. But I think that this would be a cop-out and it would be to the detriment of most of the students of this province.

And we are not going to do this, Mr. Chairman. I stand firmly by our present policy, because I think it is correct and it is responsible. We encourage school boards and schools to recommend to their students a solid core curriculum, plus a good variety of meaningful and challenging options. We put the onus, believing in local autonomy, on locally elected school trustees and on their employees, the principals of their secondary schools, along with their teachers and administrators, to recommend the specifics of the core programme for their pupils, because this is where the responsibility belongs.

It is only in this way that we can achieve a measure of flexibility at the local level, and that is what is happening. It is the way I would think, Mr. Chairman, from my contacts with educators in the field, the way most of the principals of the secondary schools of this province believe it should be handled.

In saying this, we do not give school boards or principals the ultimate authoritarian power either. It continues to be our policy that a student and IDS parents, having examined and discussed the recommended package of subjects put forward by the school, can substitute one subject for another in the package if they really wish to do so.

Now, it is this proviso-which to me makes eminent good sense-that I think gives rise to such incredulous statements as I read in the recent report, for instance, of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, titled "At What Cost?", where it said: "We now have an education system distinguished by the complete freedom of choice offered to students.

Such statements are patently ridiculous and inaccurate. 1£ there are schools where such a situation exists, and I do not know of any-and I emphasize that I do not know of any where complete freedom of choice exists then I can only suggest that the local trustees, not to mention the principals and teachers themselves, have a closer look at the way they are managing their schools.

But the hard statistical facts, when measured against 'the rather vague "perceptions" of some people, convince us that in fact we do have a responsible core curriculum for the high school students of Ontario, built upon the premise of local autonomy that leaves key decision-making powers to local people, within the broad parameters specified by the higher authority, the Ministry of Education.

Perhaps there is no more important area of our school system where a sense of perspective and objective analysis of the facts are needed today, to prevent expedient steps being taken to accommodate the criticisms at the expense of students, both present and future.

Mr. Chairman, within the ministry, and within the education community generally, there are at present a number of very important activities and studies under way which, although not yet finalized, will doubtless have a significant influence on developments in Ontario education over the next few years. Not surprisingly, many of these activities bear directly or indirectly on curriculum matters, as part of our firm resolve to obtain objective, factual information in this area before any decisions are made about possible changes for the future.

An example is the work that has been going on to systematically reviews the curriculum of the intermediate division, grades 7 to 10. Core curriculum has been one of the fundamental issues in this review. Analysis of the opinions put forward by parents, students, educators, trustees and other interested citizens has led to the development of a series of core "expectations" for each of the four grades. A draft document is now being evaluated; it is called ''The Intermediate Years," and is similar in format and intent to 'The Formative Years" for the elementary school grades.

Another example of the kind of curriculum analysis that is under way is the large-scale research project jointly commissioned by the Ministries of Education and Colleges and Universities. We are reviewing all of the educational policies of the two ministries that concern the preparation of students for postsecondary education, as well as their admission and reception into college and university programmes.

This major study, which actually comprises three separate research projects expected to be completed late this year, arose out of our concern that there was a notable lack of hard data on these matters and in these fields. We have all been hearing criticisms but these usually amount to vague opinions as to how well students are prepared, and how well they are incorporated into colleges and universities.

So we are looking at everything that affects the movement of students between secondary schools and our colleges and universities. The whole thrust of this research is to conduct a hard-nosed, objective evaluation by people who know the system hut who are essentially outsiders.

At the same time, Mr. Chairman, we will be giving close scrutiny to the report which has just been received and which the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation prepared, entitled "At What Cost?" Despite my earlier references to a particular sentence in that report and particular point made, I would like to say that I am very impressed by the scope and content of this report as a whole, and the various recommendations it presents will be reviewed very carefully in the ministry and with the teachers' federation.

On another front, there has been a great deal of action within the ministry on the broad matters of evaluation, testing and reporting to parents. Members will recall that when we last considered this ministry's estimates in November of 1975, I indicated our concern that better methods were needed to look at the evaluation and reporting methods presently being used to inform parents of the progress of their children in school. This statement of concern has been a top priority matter for us since then and we expect to be able to put forward some specific proposals later this year, after consultation with teachers, trustees and others who are, of course, most vitally interested and concerned about these matters.

In a similar way, new developments related 10 the teaching of French 'as a second language and the very important matter of multiculturalism are coming closer to reality, thanks to many months of planning, and we will have something to say about these matters in a few months.

These are just 'a few of the areas to which a great deal of time and effort has been allocated in the last six months. As examples, they serve to illustrate the extent to which we have turned a critical and introspective eye upon present educational policies and practices, and the extent to which we are determined to make any future changes in education based on factual, objective analysis of specific problems.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I would like to quote from an editorial in the current issue of what I think is a very excellent newspaper published by the Ontario Public School Men Teachers' Federation. The editor of this paper, Garth McMillan, was writing about the need for teamwork and co-operation in education as a strategy for coping with the inevitable changes which lie ahead in education. I don't think I could have expressed it any better than he did in his editorial:

The beauty of it is the solution is so simple. Co-operation not conflict; unity of purpose and attack not antagonism and confusion; trust and confidence in each other not suspicion land self-interest. That's all. It's time to stop stepping on the cracks and breaking each other's backs. It’s time to grow up.

Before I sit down, in introducing these estimates this year I would like to draw to the attention of the House the fact that there are three gentlemen attending as part of the staff of the ministry for the last time after very long and meritorious service with the Ministry of Education.

Frank Kinlin, whose most recent position was Assistant Deputy Minister, Education Development, retired on May 31 after 43 years in education in Ontario, 31 in the Ministry of Education. Stuart Stephen, who is the present Assistant Deputy Minister, Administrative and Financial Services, will be retiring on July 31 after 31 years of service in the civil service of the Province of Ontario, a large number of those recent years with the Ministry of Education. There is also a man who's probably been noticed by most of the members around this House-at least those who have been here for the last few years, perhaps not some of the newer members Gordon Chatterton, who's been the director of our legislation branch. He is retiring on June 30, after 44 years of service to education, 30 of those with the Ministry of Education. Because of the really dedicated work these men have given to education in Ontario, I wanted, at the beginning of these estimates to say publicly thank you on behalf of myself, the ministry, the government and, I'm sure, the Legislature of this province for their services to education in this province.