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| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Ontario | 28e | 3e | Discours sur l’éducation | 9 octobre 1970 | William Davis | Minister of Education | Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario |

No, I will be done before lunch. I have also had some background papers prepared which we did last year, and which will be made available to all the members. I have copies here for the opposition critics, so they will have them almost immediately.

Spokesmen. Yes, there are a number of critics; I guess the term spokesmen would be more appropriate.

So just to lead off the discussions, Mr. Chairman, and I know within the limitations of time there are many issues that the members opposite will want to discuss, I will quite frankly try to minimize my contribution at this moment, perhaps with a lengthier one when the opposition spokesmen have concluded their remarks later today or on Tuesday. However, I do want to comment very briefly on two or three aspects of the educational situation in this province, and I think it would be appropriate to begin my remarks by referring to the enlarged jurisdictions for educational programming in this province. I think that one can begin to see, emerging from the change that has taken place, some of the very positive aspects of the enlargement of the school administrations. We can do this now, Mr. Chairman, from the standpoint of certain economic factors; we can do it from the standpoint of the availability of capital provisions and the assessments that are being made by the boards themselves.

It is not quite as easy at this moment to make the evaluations related to the kinds of programming, the improvement in numbers of facilities and the improvement we think that is taking place with respect to the quality of the programme itself. These are not as easy to assess nor can they be, perhaps for a period of time, completely defined for the members of this House.

I think in any assessment of this kind one must also take into account the situation that existed in 1968, and it is very encouraging to note, Mr. Chairman-and I think this will be of interest to the members opposite-that on our preliminary run-through of the figures in 1969 and 1970-and I must emphasize that these are still on the basis of some degree not of speculation, but the final figures just are not available to us. It would appear as though the percentage increase in cost in 1969 over 1968 is somewhat less than 1968 over 1967, and it would appear as though this were the trend as well in 1970 over 1969. It would indicate that with all the difficulties that were experienced a year and a half ago, as far as total expenditures were concerned, as far as increase on a percentage basis of cost were concerned, that the enlarged jurisdictions in fact have not imposed any significant additional burden in total dollars. And perhaps there is every real indication that in total dollar terms the cost increase appears to be, shall we say, tapering off to some degree.

I would say that it is really quite encouraging, and I will perhaps even get into some dialogue with the member for Grey-Bruce as to the actual figures as they relate to' his own county board and how they have done really quite well in many situations. I am sure the hon. member would want to agree with that; I am sure he would.

However, when one makes these comparisons one has to keep in mind that we are dealing with rather different situations. We are dealing with county boards now, or larger boards, that have taken upon themselves some very real responsibilities that were not part of their prior responsibilities with respect to supervision, development of curriculum and, quite frankly, a more autonomous role as far as education is concerned.

Here we get into one of the very real problems that we face in education today and I say this with great respect to the spokesmen opposite-that when things are tough, when things are difficult in the educational field, there is a growing tendency and this is not even part of my so-called prepared remarks, but I want to emphasize this -there is a tendency to look to the central administration. There is a tendency to say inadvertently to the central administration, "You move in and resolve the problems that are basically those traditionally and under legislation of the local school authority".

Yet we get other situations that emerge from time to time when even members opposite-and I think we even draft legislation which supports what I am saying-where they say vary specifically this should be the responsibility of the local board, we should have legislation ensuring these things as being responsibilities of the local boards. We face in this province, Mr. Chairman, from time to time, not necessarily a conflict, but certainly a contradiction as to what the philosophical approach should be.

We have endeavoured within the department, and as a matter of government policy, to recognize, and I think it is relevant, that the local communities have a very real role. I am not talking economics now; I am talking philosophically in the development of an educational programme as it applies to the young people within those communities. I must reject, Mr. Chairman, and I say this very objectively, the thoughts expressed by some people that education should be totally centralized, whether through economics or any other reason, and if you do it through economics, the other, I think, by and large, follows suit.

I do reject the philosophy whereby education will be totally centralized within The Department of Education in this province. I think, Mr. Chairman, to develop an approach whereby we say that the school boards will operate so that at 11 o'clock on a Friday morning the Minister of Education of the Province of Ontario can say to himself, "In grade 2 in every school in the province of Ontario they will now be taking mathematics. They should be on page 6 of a particular text." Then he would have complete control, complete involvement. And this is true in some jurisdictions, as the members opposite fully appreciate.

I think in this day and age, with the changes that are taking place in our society, that this-in my view at least-would not be the appropriate direction to take. So I say to some of the members opposite, some of the opposition spokesmen, that when we get into the debate, when we get into individual situations, I recognize the responsibility of the minister and the department. But let us deal with them on the basis of having them at least in some way logical, and the recognition that to have complete centralization in my view is highly undesirable. When we expect local boards to have some responsibility, some autonomy, we must anticipate that they must discharge these responsibilities themselves.

I relate, Mr. Chairman, some of the experiences that the local jurisdictions have had in the past couple of years. They have been rather traumatic times for the school boards. A great deal of work has been done, a great deal has been accomplished. There has been the equalization within the counties themselves, equalization of salary situations, establishment of administration procedures, an assessment of total needs of the school board jurisdiction.

To give one or two economic indications, Mr. Chairman, it is encouraging-not encouraging, it is factually correct-that a substantial number of boards in the area of capital investment have been able to reduce the estimates that were emerging three years ago with respect to capital requirements. It is now possible for a county board to assess the number of pupil places available throughout the total county, and then determine where they can adequately either add to or move students to see that we are getting maximum utilization of the school plants themselves. It is also now possible for the boards, and they are in the process, of taking a look at a more efficient use of school plant itself. I get into some detail in this perhaps

Well, Mr. Chairman, with great respect, I. do not suggest that there have been no hardships to the people, the hardship being basically in that area of mill rate with the understanding that with the equalizing factors, the distribution of costs, which is always a problem, Mr. Chairman, that one is endeavouring to treat everybody the same. This is the whole basis of what is being done with respect to the distribution of costs.

One can argue, Mr. Chairman, as to better ways and means of distribution, and I am quite prepared to discuss this with anyone. I still am in the process of explaining to the House that when it comes to total dollar commitment - total assessment of the programmes of the new school jurisdictions one can be very encouraged, (a) as to the total amount, and (b) as to the way the school systems themselves are being administered internally.

 I think one can visit any of the jurisdictions, Mr. Chairman, and find a substantial degree of expertise with respect to school planning and school utilization now coming into being; a recognition that if you have a school of some 1,200 or 1,300 students, perhaps there are more efficient ways of distributing teacher loads, which is, in my view, very relevant at this precise moment; a recognition that, perhaps, it costs less to transport a busload of children from point A to point B, rather than have schools that one could say are totally competing 10 or 15 miles apart.

This was the case in the past-I make no bones about it, Mr. Chairman. One of the problems we faced in this province for years was the very understandable and human desire on the part of the 4,000-plus school boards and the municipalities, to have our schools in the centre of our municipality to serve our children. Totally understandable.

But, Mr. Chairman, when you begin to assess today the real impact we can have with respect to capital expenditure, realizing that young people are perhaps not as concerned about boundaries as we traditionally have been, there is no question that in the area of capital expenditure, literally millions of dollars are in the process of being saved by the establishment of the larger school units.

Mr. Chairman, I would say to the hon. member that there have been savings not within 10 years, there have been savings within some county jurisdictions as of the year 1970. This is how immediate that type of response has been to this kind of programme. I think it should also be stated and I am being just a little bit philosophical that there is a tendency to relate some of the problems of education today to the question of administration, to the question of boundaries, to the question of just what structure has been developed.

 I say with respect, Mr. Chairman, that many of the things we face in education today would have been with us, are with us and will continue to be with us, without any relationship whatsoever to the type of administrative organization that is there. The question of young people within the school system challenging some of the traditional ways of the educational process; and the question of teachers becoming more involved and wanting to develop a different approach, and to develop some of their own curriculum.

Thank heavens that this is emerging. This is part of what is happening in the educational community today and should be encouraged. Because when we centre on economics, which is very relevant-I emphasize this-but with our concentration on this, our desire to create greater efficiency, we sometimes forget there are other things of relevance happening in the school system which should be of concern and interest to all of us in this House. I do not think I need mention them here on this occasion but they should be of concern. There are many of them encouraging-and I emphasize this-and others that give us pause to reflect and to say, "Are there other ways and means of attempting to resolve the problems?" I guess I visit about as many schools in this province as anyone in this House and talk to numbers of students-not always in a positive way, from their standpoint-

We have been to Essex county; we have even been to talk to county councils down there, if my memory serves me correctly, as well as to students.

I think it is very fair to state that, as minister and I convey this impression to the House-while we sometimes emphasize the negative of what is happening, we can be very encouraged by the response of the vast majority of students within the school system of this province. I am prejudiced, you know.

Well, I am one of these people who like to be encouraged. I am not quite as negative as my friend-well, he is not always negative.

Listen, none of use would be in this House if we did not have difficulties from time to time. Life would be rather dull if we did not. I am sure the member opposite has his own problems from time to time; I do not know what they would be, but I imagine he would have the odd one.

 Without being provocative I would be prepared to suggest to my colleague, the Minister of Correctional Services, that the difficulty may be with our friends opposite for many more years yet to come.

This is a very non-partisan, totally objective approach to the educational problems, and I have only reached page 3 of my preliminary remarks. I do emphasize this, Mr. Chairman, and I think it has to be restated from time to time, because there are people in the community, and understandably so, who have developed a certain concern and perhaps a negative attitude, because of things they see happening with the very small minority of young people in this province. I just want to say-for the record, if we can use this term, Mr. Chairman-that I, for one, am very encouraged by the constructive attitudes, the responsibility and the talents that are being expressed by the young people in the school system in this province.

I might also say, Mr. Chairman, not that it is any comfort for any of us, that what we are experiencing here in the field of education is not unique to Ontario. I refer to the unrest, the concern, the desire for change and yet the reluctance to accept change which are part of what we are going through. This is something that is evidenced in every other provincial jurisdiction. There is evidence of this in most jurisdictions in the western world.

I find it very intriguing. I am sorry the member for Peterborough is not here, but people are beginning to say, should we in fact be providing educational services from kindergarten through and beyond? Should we, in fact, be looking at moving some students out into the world of work at earlier stages? Have we, in fact, moved too far?

I am very disappointed, quite frankly, Mr. Chairman, that in the University Affairs estimates, we did not get into the question of what should be the eventual long-term philosophy of this jurisdiction and others with respect to university education?

We emphasized certain things the other day-all very relevant; Laurentian and others -but, you know, we really did not come to grips with what I think is one of the very major concerns, one of the policies that will have to be established.

I can recall, not too many years ago, when the member for York South in this House got up and enunciated very specifically total freedom or accessibility to post-secondary education. I do not think anyone was going to debate this at that point-free tuition, which we do not hear as much about these days-and yet the member for Peterborough, not only here but in some speeches, has been questioning whether or not this is right, not on a matter of economics solely but on the question of philosophy. These are the questions I think that have to be raised.