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| Ontario | 29e | 2e | Discours sur l’éducation | 23 mai 1972 | Thomas Wells | Minister of Education | Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario |

Mr. Chairman, in presenting for the first time the estimates of the Ministry of Education I would like to begin by speaking in plain and concrete terms about some basic trends in Ontario education, and to give some specific examples of recent developments that are resulting in an improved quality of education in our elementary and secondary schools.

Mr. Chairman, I said that as a starting point I would like to mention some of the effects and implications of the ceilings on educational expenditures, which came into effect two years ago. In February and March of this year there was a resurgence of public discussion about the cost ceilings in some areas of the province at a time when certain school boards were in the throes of finalizing their budgets for 1972.

A great many claims were made at that time, Mr. Chairman, as to how the cost ceilings were going to have a deteriorating effect on the quality of education. However, once things settled down and 1972 school board budgets were finally set, it quickly became clear that none of the talk about drastic staff cuts or large increases in class size had materialized, nor had the speculation that the quality of education would deteriorate in Ontario schools. Most of these forecasts were largely based on misunderstanding and sometimes on exaggeration although I do not doubt the sincerity of the people who spoke on these matters at that time.

Much of the inaccuracy was based on an incorrect belief that spending on education in Ontario was being cut, which was simply not the case. The provincial cost ceilings only placed a limit on the amount by which a school board's budget could be increased each year.

We have not had budget cuts in Ontario education. We are aware of no boards that will have to spend fewer dollars per pupil in 1972 than they did in 1971. But, while school board budgets are still being increased, a successful effort has, and is being, made to control the size of the increases in response to evidence from all sides that educational spending has reached a point where taxpayers will go no further.

Despite some isolated vocal evidence to the contrary, most school board trustees and administrators, privately and often publicly, acknowledge the need for constraints on educational spending. It is generally agreed among educators and educational officials that we can't keep on accelerating the rate of spending, first, because public financial resources can't keep up with it, and also because unlimited spending isn't needed to maintain or improve the quality of education.

I think it is important, Mr. Chairman, to understand the decisions as to how school boards plan their budgets have been left largely to the boards themselves. They have been free to determine the order and choice of their own priorities. Decisions to alter particular programmes or make other changes in order to meet budget limits have been decisions of the boards alone. It is also important, I think, to remember that the limits on total expenditures are not the same for every school board across the province.

An integral part of the ceilings is a series of special allowances called weighting factors, which take special circumstances of individual boards into account -as well as regional differences. Extra assistance is provided to boards for exceptional circumstances related to compensatory and special education programmes. Extra assistance also applies to boards for such factors as commodity prices, differences in northern areas, additional maintenance for older schools, special needs arising from abnormal growth patterns or transfers and certain aspects of vocational education. School boards in larger cities, for example, have higher ceilings than small boards in order that they may cope with inner-city problems that are more prevalent in large urban areas.

Similarly, Mr. Chairman, boards in the territorial districts have higher ceilings because of the higher costs of living in the north combined with the sparseness of population. A great deal of work has been done to ensure that the weighting factors are as fair and equitable as possible. Our goal is to ensure that proper consideration is given to school boards with excellent programmes or special projects that are benefiting children, or boards which have unique costs related to their geographic location or other factors beyond their control.

For this reason, Mr. Chairman, the weighting factors were originally established only after exhaustive study of the spending patterns of almost every school board in the province and they are being constantly reviewed. Adjustments have been made, year-by-year, to recognize changing situations and we are spending much time, Mr. Chairman, analyzing the weighting factors that will apply to boards for their 1973 budgets.

This review, Mr. Chairman, is essential to the continuing equity of the cost ceilings as they apply to individual boards. We have met with many boards in the past few months and have been in close touch with teacher and school trustee organizations. We are doing everything possible to ensure that the weighting factors are realistic and reasonable.

Mr. Chairman, when the cost ceilings were introduced for 1971, there were a number of school boards around this province which were spending more per pupil than the ceilings permitted, even after allowances were made by means of the weighting factors for special programmes and other legitimate factors which forced some boards to spend more than others on certain items. These boards, which were above the ceilings, have been given three years to bring their spending into line. The third year is 1973 so that when 1973 budgets are prepared, all school boards in the province will be required to stay within the weighted ceilings.

Now this exercise is going to be difficult indeed, Mr. Chairman, for some hoards, particularly those that have not taken steps in the past two years to pave the way for the 1973 deadline. However, while acknowledging this difficulty which some boards may have, I wish to emphasize that the vast majority of school boards have done an excellent job of holding down spending increases and should be able to meet the ceilings in years to come without undue difficulty.

I would like to quote, Mr. Chairman, a paragraph from an article in a recent issue of the Newsletter of the Halton County Board of Education. In this article, Mr. William J. Priestner, chairman of the board's finance committee, reports to the people of Halton County on the fact that education taxes in the county will be dropping for the third consecutive year. Mr. Priestner said this in part:

What about the government's ceilings that have been in the news lately? We have all heard complaints from school boards, which can't get down to the spending limits imposed by the province. Your board has always operated under the ceilings and will do so again this year. We feel that the ceilings are necessary to control the extraordinary growth in education spending that we have witnessed in the last decade.

Many school boards in Ontario have demonstrated Mr. Chairman, good management and long-range planning. There are many examples of boards, which have planned wisely, sincerely and successfully, and these boards have been able to pass on reasonable mill rates to their taxpayers and have not had to make alterations in their programmes that have had a detrimental effect on their children.

There are some people who would have us believe that the ceilings represent a great contradiction; that you cannot expect to see improvement in education while at the same time trying to slow down cost increases. Mr. Chairman, we have all been living under cost ceilings for the past two years now and I would say to you that there is no evidence that such a contradiction exists. In fact, the evidence to me suggests that there is definitely plenty of room for curriculum innovation and real improvement in the quality of education within the bounds of the budget limits that now exist. Again, I would briefly quote Mr. Priestner of the Halton county board. He says:

Sometimes when we get involved in financial matters, we tend to forget our real purpose and that is the kids. It is of little use to keep costs in control if the programme offered is suffering. This year's budget does not curtail any existing programmes and as an example allows more money for field trips.

Mr. Chairman, there is no doubt that we are in a period of transition in education in Ontario. We are changing gears between decades when the emphasis was on quantity, to a decade when the emphasis will be on quality. Naturally, the transition takes some getting used to, and the last year or two have been difficult, we acknowledge, for many school boards; but, Mr. Chairman, we must look on these few years as a period of adjustment. There is evidence all over the province that convinces me that we are on the verge of a visible move forward toward a greater emphasis on the quality of education.

Within the Ministry of Education, Mr. Chairman, we have been making major changes to reorganize our structure and make it possible for our people to be much more flexible and responsive in working with school boards and teachers. These changes have been much more than a mere shuffling on an organizational chart. When everyone settles in their new job assignments, there is no doubt that the staff of the Ministry of Education will be more efficient and effective in playing a leadership role and in responding to the needs of teachers and boards in terms of practical services and backup assistance.

We have been saying for quite a while that individual school boards, Mr. Chairman, must take much more responsibility for deciding what goes on in their schools. We have been saying that decisions about spending priorities, about the choice of programmes, about curriculum development, about personnel requirements, should be the business of the local school boards. We have been saying that the role of the ministry is increasingly a consultative role, providing practical advisory assistance in these matters, rather than dictatorial orders.

There has been a lot of misunderstanding about this, Mr. Chairman, and quite frankly, it has often seemed that people didn't believe us or else they actually preferred the old rigid system where there was little room for local flexibility and adaptability. However, there is an increasing number of boards and teachers around the province that have caught the spirit of what we are trying to do, and there are signs everywhere that the concept of local decision making is spreading.

A good example of this has been the realization by many teachers that they now have great opportunities to playa vital role in curriculum development in their schools. Teachers are beginning to realize that the Minister of Education really intends them to have the right and responsibility of developing their own courses, and of choosing their own textbooks and supplementary teaching aids, within the broad guidelines which we provide the basic textbooks, which may be used with any particular course, are listed in a document that we publish called Circular 14. As recently as about 10 years ago, there was only one text list listed for each course. However, over the years, in a deliberate attempt to involve teachers in the selection of the text, a greater choice has been built in.

Today, for each curriculum subject, there are multiple choices as to which basic text may be used. This allows much more freedom for teachers in creating varied and interesting courses, using more than one basic text if they wish. In addition to the basic text for each course, there is also a wide range of supplemental books and materials, many of them inexpensive, which teachers may bring into the classroom to provide background or depth on particular aspects or portions of the course.

Mr. Chairman, teachers are free to choose these materials, subject, of course, to the budgets and general arrangements in each school. Mr. Chairman, over 3,000 supplemental materials of Canadian origin was recently compiled within the Ministry of Education in a document, which we call Circular 15. This is the first major effort to compile a directory of learning materials in this country, prepared by Canadians for Canadians.

Mr. Chairman, I would say that, as Minister of Education, I firmly believe that our schools should be using textbooks and other materials written and produced by Canadians. Because of our belief in the need for the increasing responsibility of teachers to get actively involved in the selection of textbooks and supplemental aids, copies of Circular 14 and 15 were mailed to each teacher in this province and I considered it essential that this be done.

In a similar way, teachers today have a far greater role in curriculum development than in the past. The Ministry of Education no longer provides detailed course outlines specifying how a subject must be taught by every. Teacher to every student in the province. Instead, a booklet called a "curriculum guideline" is issued for each area of study.

Each guideline explains the nature and scope of the subject, and makes suggestions for teaching it-and in doing so, outlines the boundaries for a variety of approaches that teachers might use in teaching the particular subject.

Mr. Chairman, in effect, each curriculum guideline is a skeleton to which teachers can add the flesh. Each is sufficiently flexible as to allow a school or a teacher considerable scope in deciding the specifics as to how the subject might best be taught in the particular school or particular community.

Mr. Chairman, this approach reflects better than any other example the Ministry of Education's emphasis on local decision-making geared to local needs or interests. In every community in Ontario, there is now a dramatic new opportunity to develop fresh approaches to curriculum, based on the needs and the interests of the students and the community.

Now, Mr. Chairman, there are some who say that teachers are not ready to adapt to these changes. I do not accept this generalization. The nature of the curriculum guidelines is broad enough to allow teachers maximum flexibility in deciding how to teach their subjects. The guidelines are having a very positive effect in giving teachers a chance to use their own ingenuity, creativity and experience in the courses they teach. Mr. Chairman, I would say that in the province of Ontario there is certainly no ceiling on imagination, initiative and innovation.

It is a testimony to the initiative of teachers that over 2,000 innovative courses have been developed an over Ontario in the past two years. There are many hundreds of interesting examples, including a course in one way on Manitoulin Island, a variety of courses that have focused on particular aspects of Canada and its people and special courses in family life education, and I could name many more.

And I think, Mr. Chaiman, it is testimony to the calibre of professional competence of teachers that of all such experimental courses submitted to the ministry for approval, about 90 per cent have been approved after careful review and study by curriculum officials of the ministry.

The significance of this new flexible approach to local curriculum development can best be appreciated if we look back 10 or 12 years when teaching meant using a prescribed textbook and covering a prescribed amount of material to pass prescribed exams.

In days past, it was sometimes said that the school curriculum was dull and irrelevant to the needs of students and a changing society. These new approaches, which I have described, have already gone a long way toward overcoming this situation. As an additional safeguard to keep courses of study relevant and contemporary, our ministry has begun a procedure that will ensure that all existing curriculum guidelines will be reviewed frequently and systematically.

The reactions and recommendations of teachers, pupils and parents are being sought. A representative "curriculum revision committee" is at work this year, Mr. Chairman, analysing primary and junior level programmes. This committee includes teachers, parents, principals and other representatives of all levels of education, and also includes representation based on geographic, ethnic and religious factors. This procedure is a virtual guarantee that no curriculum guideline will become static or out-dated.

In addition to this, new curriculum guidelines for new courses are being continually developed as a need or widespread interest becomes apparent.

Now, let me give a few examples, Mr. Chairman. We've recently provided schools with guidelines for the new programme on urban studies, world religions, people in politics, and on law, and many schools may soon be offering courses developed from these guidelines. The world religions course will be offered in over 100 schools in the province, beginning next September.

The curriculum guideline on people and politics, which is just now being distributed, is a good example of how contemporary the classroom may become as teachers grasp their new flexibility and responsibility. Under this new guideline, teachers can develop courses that study Canadian nationalism and Canadian-American relations. Students can also study such issues as war, peace, law, authority, freedom, social justice, revolution, power and conflict.

Those of us who attended high school a decade or two ago may find it difficult to imagine such topics on the curriculum actually leading to credits for a secondary school graduation diploma. But, Mr. Chairman, who would disagree with today's young people being exposed to urgent and contemporary topics such as these?

These are just some of the very significant developments that have taken place regarding the curriculum in the schools of Ontario. Two major factors which determine the quality of education are clearly what is taught and how it is taught; and on both counts, Mr. Chairman, Ontario has' been making great strides forward in the past few years.

However, there have also been a number of other developments in our schools' which will directly affect the nature and quality of the educational experience to which the individual student is exposed. One I would specifically mention is the credit system, which will be operating in all secondary schools of this province this fall.

Basically, the credit system is based on the premise that it is impossible in this' day of rapid change to rigidly specify a list of definite courses which will answer the. Need of each and every student in the province or, indeed, in any given school. Every student's needs are different; every student's interests are different; and every student's future plans are different, Mr. Chairman. Add to this the fact that society is changing very quickly and I believe you have a situation where flexibility in education is the only proper approach in preparing our young people for the world that they will face in the future. .

The credit system provides this flexibility, while at the same time it ensures that students are equipped with a good grounding in basic skills and knowledge that will serve them well regardless of where their future leads them.

This system, Mr. Chairman, is an outgrowth of a project started in the mid-1960s in which a small group of secondary schools in the province tested-out and developed some basic approaches to flexibility in curriculum. About 80 percent of Ontario's secondary schools are now at least nominally operating under the new system; and' this September all secondary schools will be expected to adopt it.

Under the credit system there is no rigid "core curriculum" of subjects. In a fast changing world it is impossible to predict in advance that any given core of basic. Subjects will provide the specific knowledge and skills that will be essential in the future. However, all the courses that may be taught in a secondary school are divided into four categories, and the Ministry of. Education requires that each student take a minimum number of courses from each of these four broad areas in order to ensure that he has a sound education base and well founded foundation.

The four categories are:

1. Communications; which includes English, -French and other languages.

2. Social and environmental studies; including subjects like history, geography, urban studies and law.

3. Pure and applied sciences; including mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, and so on.

4. Arts; including such subjects as music and dramatic arts.

Beyond the requirements that students take a basic number of courses from each of these four areas, we believe that students should be free to choose their remaining courses themselves, in close consultation with their parents, teachers, and the school staff.

Needless to say, students intending to go to college or university must keep admission requirements in mind when selecting their secondary school courses. The same, Mr. Chairman, also applies to those who intend to seek a particular type of job after completing secondary school.

But the overall goal is to give each student a chance to take a wide range of courses that will test his ability and self-discipline and broaden his horizons considerably.

We have found that students, because they must now take an active part in decisions affecting themselves, are shifting from passive to active learning. In those schools where this new approach has been adopted enthusiastically by the principal and teachers, discipline problems have often been reduced considerably and the reasons seem to be that students are much more serious about their courses when they have actually had a hand in choosing them.

It is obvious that some secondary schools have capitalized on this new flexible approach more enthusiastically and successfully than others. There are still some principals, teachers and parents who apparently feel that students cannot or should not be left to choose their courses themselves, and that students will ignore some of the traditional basic subjects. But I would say that the evidence is to the contrary.

Here are some September 1971 statistics that I think are relevant. The number of students taking English at the grade 13 level augmented by 25.5 per cent. In history the increase was 12 percent, and general science was on a par with the previous year. Grade 12 mathematics is 12.8 per cent gain. In general, there are significant increases in English, mathematics, technologies and some areas of science and art.

At the same time, there has been a growth in interdisciplinary work so that aspects of certain subjects such as history now appear in a number of other courses instead of only under the one old fixed label.

Now the figures we have from the schools for 1972 indicate that the so-called basic subjects are not being rejected by students, even though they now have more freedom to pursue learning experiences that relate either to modem issues or to their own particular interests. Because young people are not being blocked into predetermined and packaged programmes under the new system there are some other benefits worth noting. For example, many more students than before are now choosing one or two technical courses, for instance auto mechanics, because they now know that this does not commit them to a total technical programme. There has been a 46 per cent increase over last year in the personal typewriting course, since this option is now open to any student regardless of his career choice.

Before concluding may I take note of the fact that the high standard of special educational services developed in this province is being maintained within the financial resources now available to school boards. It is true that boards have had to take a close look at their programmes to make sure they are effective and to make sure they are not duplicating services provided by other agencies. But there is no indication that special education has suffered. As a matter of fact, most of the evidence suggests that school boards are becoming more involved with special education programmes than in the past. For example, new regulations come into effect next September making retarded children eligible to apply for full-time school attendance at the same age 'as any other child, with the right to attend school until the age of 21.

These changes will firmly establish that school law governing the basic rights of attendance applies in this province to all children. It is worth noting, I think, that between 25 and 30 school boards applied to introduce the new attendance regulation well ahead of the mandatory date of September 1, 1972.

Let me stress again that I firmly believe that Ontario is entering a decade when emphasis on the quality of education will be forceful and visible. In a recent survey, conducted by an independent research group for the Ministry of Education, about 1,000 parents in all parts of this province gave

Their opinions on how they defined quality education, and about half of them zeroed in on the end product of the educational system as, of course, we would expect the student to do himself. They said quality education means students who show initiative, are able to reason, have practical skills, are well adjusted, and so on. The calibre of teaching was also mentioned frequently, as well as the need for courses that are practical, varied and interesting.

When asked what is the most important thing schools should teach, a sizable number of parents replied that schools should teach students to think on their own, or should stress skills of analysis and inquiry. When present directions and policies in Ontario education are evaluated against these objectives, it is very clear to me that our schools, which are already providing a quality of education that is virtually unmatched anywhere, are moving forward in ways that win serve our young people even better in the future.

Mr. Chairman, it is significant to note that the vast majority of parents included in our survey registered a favourable impression of existing educational services in Ontario. Eighty-five per cent described themselves as moderately to very happy with the quality of education provided, and 70 per cent said that education has improved in the past five years. I believe that this is a very positive base of public support upon which we can very aggressively move forward through the 1970’s.