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| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Ontario | 34e | 1e | Discours sur l’éducation | 21 février 1989 | Christopher Ward | Minister of Education | Ontario Liberal Party |

I do indeed welcome this 1 opportunity to report to the social development committee on some of the initiatives my ministry has undertaken in recent months and also to discuss briefly the direction I see our educational system moving cowards in the future. Ido not intend to outline every single activity of my ministry since the beginning of the fiscal year but rather to briefly focus on a few areas that I think are particularly significant.

First, though, this being estimates, I should note that the resources of our educational system are impressive. In Ontario, we have 170 publicly elected school boards employing more than 95,000 teachers in 5,300 schools with an enrolment of about 1.8 million full-time stu­dents. Additionally, it should be noted that nearly half a million adults take credit and noncredit courses in continuing education class­es.

To fund this system, our elementary and secondary schools will receive from provincial revenues this calendar year a total of $4,129,000,000. This represents an increase $237 million plus over last year or an increase of 6.1 per cent. These moneys will flow during the last three months of the current fiscal year and the first nine months of the 1989-90 fiscal year.

On top of this, school boards will be receiving $300 million this year to assist them in complet­ing capital projects, part of a three-year govern­ment commitment for $900 million. In addition, the teachers' superannuation fund will receive an estimated $515 million from the province during this year.

In reviewing the year, I would like to speak to you first about some of the changes we have made to improve the quality of education offered in Ontario, beginning with the implementation of our 1987 throne speech initiatives.

Second, I would like to take a few moments lo reflect upon the school's role in introducing our children to some of society's key values and issues. Over the past year, our classrooms have seen important changes with the introduction of mandatory education about acquired immune deficiency syndrome, new approaches to opening exercises, and taking effect this September, mandatory drug education and a new policy on heritage languages.

Finally, I will briefly focus upon my ministry’s commitment to helping students make the transition from school to work, a topic of intense scrutiny in my ministry, and I am sure, before the select committee on education and indeed throughout the educational community.

I would like to comment briefly on the work of the select committee because, as you know our whole system of education in this province has been under intense scrutiny now for the past couple of years. There were six major contracts awarded to look at particular issues on the relevance of our educational system. We had within the ministry the student transition and retention project that looked at the issues of the effectiveness and relevance of our education systems.

I want to compliment the select committee for its work in bringing together a wide variety of input and certainly a number of points of view in its extensive work in trying to establish some consensus around some of the many kinds of changes being proposed.

I believe that under the rules of the Legislature, my ministry has up to 120 days to reply to a committee report. As I indicated at the time, I look forward to coming before the Legislature and the public at large with our initiatives in response not only to the select committee but indeed to much of the input we have received from a wide variety of sources. I, for one, am very excited in terms of the new directions we will be taking.

To improve the quality of education though, I believe you have to start at the beginning and I believe that is exactly what we are doing with our initiative to reduce class sizes in grades 1 and 2. I think it is widely recognized, and certainly firmly believe, that smaller classes in these critical first years will help lay a strong foundation for success in each child's school career.

It should be noted that in many of the pilot projects and much of the work that was done on relevance in the issue of dropouts, it was clearly established that most students at risk become at risk very early in their academic or scholastic careers. In my view, the primary division is certainly not a place that is too early to start; in fact, it is the appropriate place to begin.

In the 1987-88 school year, the average class size in grades 1 and 2 was 28.2 pupils per teacher. In establishing our three-year implementation plan, the goal for 1988-89 was to reduce this 28.2 average to an average of 24.7, and I am happy to say that across the system as a whole we actually exceeded that target. The pupil-teacher ratio in grades 1 and 2 after the first year of implementation was 24.6. Our objective is to reach a pupil-teacher ratio of 22 to 1 by the next school year with a final goal of 20 pupils per teacher by September 1990.

To ensure our teachers are able to take advantage of the smaller classes 10 improve learning, my ministry will provide special training for primary-grade teachers. Beginning this spring, workshops will be presented by our regional offices at the request of school boards from throughout Ontario.

We are also distributing funds to school boards to purchase additional learning materials for the primary and junior divisions as well as funds to purchase more textbooks for students at both the elementary and senior levels.

In the area of classroom computers, in 1988 we made available to school boards an additional $10 million to purchase grant-eligible computer systems, plus another $3 million to acquire appropriate software. These grants are the first portion of a three-year commitment.

We have also begun this year to conduct a major revision of the curriculum for the primary and junior divisions, known as The Formative Years, A discussion paper on proposed changes will be available for widespread consultation very shortly.

In the wake of the first report of the select committee and various reports submitted to my ministry, we are reviewing policies, including streaming, compulsory courses and general-level programs, that affect students from grade 7 through to the end of secondary school. I believe we will be able to address many of these issues, in part through the current review of OSIS-Ontario Schools, Intermediate and Senior Divisions-which is already well under way.

Recent studies have suggested that Ontario students have fallen behind those of some other jurisdictions in the critical areas of science and mathematics. As I have indicated before, this is of great concern and we must focus on these areas. That is what we will be doing this March 1 at a major conference we have organized called Celebrating Science, which will be held here in Toronto.

In the ministry, we have responded to these needs in several ways and many of our initiatives are just now beginning to take effect. For example, we have issued new curriculum guidelines for mathematics and science from grade 7 to the end of high school; we have undertaken a provincial review of grade 6 mathematics; we have provided additional funds to strengthen science programs in grades 7 to 10, and we have provided funds for additional learning materials for science and math students up to grade 6. We have also issued a new science policy guideline called Science is Happening Here to help teachers give new meaning and importance to science subjects.

On the Ontario academic course level, quality is also the focus of a new program to establish consistency across the province in setting and marking final-year high school examinations. Since the end of provincially set final examinations in 1967, wide variations in examinations have developed among schools. This has made it increasingly difficult for universities to compare results from different schools when considering entrance eligibility.

First, we earned out a pilot project to make sure our approach was the right one. A new format for setting and marking English 1 Ontario academic course examinations was developed for use by our high schools. Results of the test showed we were on the right track. Using our new format, Ontario high schools achieved an unprecedented level of consistency in designing and marking the university-entrance English examination last spring. Similar programs arc now under way for other subjects, including science and mathematics.

Measuring the performance of Ontario's educational system is an important aspect of ensuring quality of education. Through provincial reviews, such as those carried out this year on grade 6 reading and mathematics, and by helping to develop national indicators to provide a common measurement among all Canadian provinces, we are carefully and effectively, I believe, setting high standards for Ontario' educational system.

Changes in technology, particularly in the development of the computer, are having a major impact on how we teach our children in the schools. Computer literacy is becoming increasingly essential. To meet that need, my ministry has revitalized its computers-in-education program.

In addition to the considerable new capita commitment l mentioned earlier, this past year we have taken steps to make it possible for more computer manufacturers to have their computers approved for use in Ontario classrooms. We are moving to improve software portability, so that new and existing computer programs can be used on all approved hardware. Also, I have made it possible for school boards to get better value for their dollar by allowing them, for example, to access ministry funds to buy less expensive computers and to provide computer training for teachers.

We know computers have, as well, special abilities to help us teach disadvantaged students. For example, computers can now help the blind to read, the deaf to see their voices and those with low literacy skills to make rapid advances. Our first centre for special education technology, helping educators apply these new tools, was announced in November and will open in April at the John P. Robarts School in London.

As I have suggested, improving the quality of education requires action on several fronts and I believe we are achieving steady progress towards that goal. I believe our school system has an important role in teaching, reinforcing and engendering certain social values and in responding to emerging social needs. Over the past year, we have had plenty of discussion on this aspect of the education system and I believe we have made some important advances. For example, this year we have seen the introduction of mandatory education concerning acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

To escalate our fight against drug abuse, beginning this September we will be making drug education topics mandatory in grades four to 10. A draft curriculum guideline on physical and health education containing this requirement is currently completing the validation process, along with a recommendation of the task force of the member for Muskoka-Georgian Bay (Mr. Black) on drug abuse.

School boards will be required, as well, to develop drug education policies by September 1990. To assist them, we have set up an advisory committee representing the educational community as well as the Ontario Provincial Police, the Addiction Research Foundation and my ministry.

Our school system is educating our children about many of the problems that challenge us in a modem society, but it is also helping them to understand, reinforce and celebrate some of our many strengths. For example, in recognition of and respect for our province's multicultural reality we have made heritage languages instruction in elementary schools mandatory, beginning with the new school year in September. Boards of education will be required to provide instruction when parents of 25 students or more from that board request instruction in a specific language. I look forward to introducing legislation to implement our new policy in the very near future.

We have also taken initiatives to ensure that the roles of opening exercises and religious education in the schools reflect educational purposes while recognizing the diverse makeup of our province's population. In concurrence with the Canadian Charter of Rights and a subsequent ruling by the Ontario Court of Appeal, we have changed the regulation on public school opening or closing exercises. I believe that with our new regulations we have provided school boards with an excellent educational opportunity to open or close the school day with exercises that will reinforce our children's sense of tolerance and understanding in our diverse multicultural and multifaith society.

You will also be aware that we have undertaken a ministerial inquiry into the provision of religious education in the public elementary schools. The inquiry is reviewing our existing policy and is looking at policy options that arc more appropriate to the multifaith makeup of Ontario's population. Just this past week, Dr. Glenn Watson, a former director of education for Brant county who is directing the inquiry, has advertised his call for briefs.

This government has also taken significant steps to recognize the fact that our history and our nation's Constitution have accorded special rights to our francophone minority in Ontario. In the past year we have made great strides in French-language education in this province.

In recent months, Ontario bus established two models of French-Language school boards. The francophone community in the Ottawa-Carleton region now has its own board to look after the requirements of the large number of French-speaking students in that area, and to make decisions on education for Toronto's francophone community the Metropolitan Toronto French-Language School Council was recently established.

In addition, I announced that a new French-language service for our independent learning centre will open in Sudbury this year to significantly enhance educational services for francophone citizens.

The last time I spoke in this committee room, I said that I believe we must do more to assist those students in our system who are likely to drop out, often without completing their final years of high school.

Our educational system muse equip our children with the attitudes and skills they will need to enter the job market, whether through gaining additional education or by moving directly to a job. This means being flexible, creative and in tune with the realities and expectations of today's workplace. Relevance, in particular, is a key to improving student retention.

We know that we can assist students in making career choices with new approaches, such as our job-search skills and interactive computer-assisted student guidance information systems, by encouraging business-education co-operation and by creating local industry-education councils.

This partnership with the community is particularly important to our schools and, in fact, the theme of Education Week this year, during the last week of April, will be "Partnerships for Success." School boards are working on events to celebrate and further cement the partnerships their schools have developed with parents, community leaders, focal businesses and other organizations.

Over the last year, we have funded 12 key projects developed by individual school boards, all aimed at reducing the dropout rate. One such project targeted black children in North York who have been identified as being at risk of dropping out. Last year, the project took on 37 high-risk students and, ram pleased to say' all 37 remain in school.

One of the most effective ways we have found to help students make career choices is through co-operative education programs. Students gain a real insight into specific jobs through work terms in local businesses or other organizations while getting academic credit for the work. A special form of co-op education, the student work apprenticeship program, SWAP, in co-operation with the Ministry of Skills Development, is aimed at teaching technological skills, with apprenticeship work terms part of the school year.

In addition, we raised public awareness of the co-op education programs through a newspaper and radio advertising campaign. Brochures and videotapes have also been distributed to schools.

While the more than $13 million in pilot project funding that had been made available to school boards for co-op programs runs out at the end of this fiscal year, these incentive funds have allowed us to fully test and develop the co-op system with the enthusiastic co-operation of some 120 school boards across the province. All concerned in this program-boards, teachers, students and employers-have told us how useful this program is.

We are currently reviewing the successes we have had with both our co-op education and the student retention programs to determine how we can most usefully place these programs on a permanent footing. I hope to come forward with proposals in this regard in the very near future.

Let me now tum to the question of where we are heading. In the coming year, our focus will continue to be on quality, equality and accountability. Underlying this agenda will be the bringing forward of our plans for improving the funding mechanism designed to ensure fairness and equity, while preserving and building upon the stability and viability of a strong public school system.

To improve the quality of education, we must continue to emphasize the role of elementary schools in providing basic skills and attitudes towards learning and the role of secondary schools in preparing their students for adult life, whether it be for additional education or for a career. Hand in hand with this, of course, is support for further professional development of teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels.

Quality means establishing clear standards for and measuring the effectiveness of our educational system. In other words, we must and will improve the ways lo measure achievements by our students. We can and will improve student performance compared to previous years and compared to students in other jurisdictions.

We must also promote greater equality in our system. Here I am not just talking about equality for francophone, equality for women, for ethnic minorities, for native children and for exceptional students; and I am not just talking about equality of opportunity: I am speaking about equality of outcome, a notion that was brought very forcefully forward through the work of the select committee.

I think we all recognize that education is the key. Education can be the great equalizer in our society. Education is the one service we deliver that can help each and every individual in our society rise from a background that perhaps in the past has been one of disadvantage.

The programs we adopt in the years ahead will be focused on these themes: quality improvement, effective measuring of achievement, greater equity in the system and equality of outcome. I look forward to taking on that challenge, together with all of our many partners in the educational community, in order to continue and expand upon the major improvements we have made in Ontario's education system.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your questions.