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| Ontario | 35e | 2e | Discours sur l’éducation | 30 juin 1992 | Tony Silipo | Minister of Education | Ontario New Democratic Party |

I would like first of all to say I am pleased to be here before the standing committee on estimates. It's nice to be back in a committee room. I hope I'll still be able to say I'm pleased to have been here at the end of this process, but I suspect I will.

All I'm going to do in terms of introduction is to introduce Ray Chénier, acting deputy minister, who's sitting with me. There are a number of other officials from the ministry who are here and can assist us in the process as we go through, but I won't take the time to introduce them now.

As I said, I am pleased to have this opportunity to appear before you and present the 1992-93 estimates for the Ontario Ministry of Education. We have accomplished, I believe, a significant amount in recent years and are charting a course for the future which will reshape and redirect our schools and education system in a fundamental and lasting way.

Economic renewal, as you know, is a top priority of the Ontario government. Jobs, services and controlling the deficit are keys to putting Ontario back to work. Change to our elementary and secondary education system supports this agenda. It supports it in the short term through measures to promote restructuring and flexibility at the school board level; it supports it in the longer term through measures to renew our school system so that it will continue to provide Ontario's young people with an education that prepares them for a prosperous future.

Our mission is to provide leadership in three areas: enabling all learners -- children, youth and adults -- to develop their full potential both as individuals and as contributing members of their communities; ensuring that those who participate in education -- learners, teachers, trustees and administrators -- perform to the best of their ability; and helping build a prosperous, responsible society.

We have diligently pursued this mission and have made significant strides in restructuring Ontario's educational system. Many of you will know that the ministry has initiated a plan for program reform that will change the focus of education at all grade levels. The plan focuses on and sets overall objectives for the following six key areas:

1. In the early years, junior kindergarten and kindergarten, the objective is to provide a quality of access to a balanced education program for four- and five-year-old children.

2. In the formative years, grades 1 to 6, the objective is to give students opportunities to develop basic learning skills, including literacy and numeracy.

3. In the transition years, grades 7 to 9, the objective is to give students more time to discover their talents and interests and to facilitate the transition from elementary to secondary school.

4. In the specialization years, grade 10 through graduation, the objective is to give students opportunities to explore possible career choices and develop their full potential.

5. In the technological education area, the objective is to ensure that students develop the technological skills they will need in our society.

6. We know that in teacher education, an important area, the objective is to ensure that teachers are provided with appropriate pre-service education and ongoing professional development so that they can meet the needs of their students and deliver quality education.

There has been extensive consultation on this plan, highlighted by the publication of consultation papers for the early years, the formative years, the transition years, the specialization years and technological education. I want to acknowledge, of course, that this work was begun even before this government took office and that it is work we are delighted to continue.

While progress has been made, current economic conditions prompted us to set in place a process to accelerate and focus education reform. This was first seen in the most recent throne speech, in which the government recognized the critical importance of education to our society and economy. It is now being reflected in the actions the Ministry of Education is taking. We are concentrating on fast-tracking our efforts in three areas: program reform, education finance reform and education governance.

A key to economic recovery is the restructuring of Ontario's broader public sector to maintain and improve service. For the elementary and secondary education sector, this means we are committed to changing the way in which we carry out the education enterprise in Ontario. "Change" means that school boards must operate in a more cooperative framework with each other, with their employees and with other service agencies in their communities. In these areas, as well as in everything the ministry does from here on, four principles -- excellence, equity, accountability and partnership -- will serve as the foundation for future progress and as benchmarks against which success can be measured.

"Excellence" means a new commitment to the highest possible achievement in literacy and numeracy for all our students. It means a commitment to helping students to develop analytical and critical skills to prepare them for a life of learning, genuine and responsible citizenship and full participation in our society and economy.

"Equity" means a commitment to social justice. It means building a system that is (1) free of barriers raised on the basis of ethno-cultural or racial background, gender or socioeconomic level, and (2) it means building a system that is proactive in its commitment to a relevant curriculum and equity of outcome for students of every social group and background.

"Accountability" means we can show how effectively our school system meets these goals of excellence and equity. It means describing clearly the appropriate levels of achievement for students throughout our school system and demonstrating publicly how well our students do.

"Partnership" means recognizing the shared responsibility for education in Ontario. We fully realize the importance of the role local school boards and schools play in realizing our common commitment to excellence and equity. However, it is only when all the stakeholders -- parents and students, teachers and other school board staff, ministry officials and trustees -- work together with a common understanding and purpose that genuine change can come about.

As I mentioned, we are focusing our attention in the near to medium-term future on program reform, education finance reform and education governance.

First, in regard to program reform, over the coming months we will bring our current program initiatives together in a comprehensive package of reform. Our consultations on the early years, the formative years, the transition years and technological education have been fruitful in working towards an understanding of these areas and in helping us to work out directions we should take. Two other consultations, one on the specialization years, the other on integration of exceptional students into local community classrooms and schools, will soon be completed and their findings will feed into this process.

We are currently developing a more detailed set of principles that will guide the comprehensive education policy. Throughout the summer, a small working group that includes members from the ministry and the education community will work to draft a document that lays out this framework for education reform in Ontario. Our intention is to present a proposed direction this fall.

In regard to education finance reform, as I'm sure you know, I have established a minister's advisory committee which I chair, which includes representatives of each of the four school board trustee organizations in Ontario, the Ontario Teachers' Federation and school support staff unions. We are working in step with the ministry's finance reform secretariat and the government's Fair Tax Commission. Our objective is to put together recommendations that will go to cabinet in early 1993 with a view to begin implementation of finance reform in September 1993.

Everyone here I think understands that a new approach to school funding is a critical component of change in the education sector. The current education funding system was designed in the late 1960s. It no longer meets the educational needs of students. It can no longer support the kinds of education programs and services that we need in the fast-changing world of the 1990s. We need a system that is fair to taxpayers and fair to students.

In regard to education governance, the government is committed to the autonomy and rights of Roman Catholic separate school boards, to the initiatives under way for first nations communities and to French-language education governance in Ontario. At the same time the financial pressures on boards clearly show that it is time to begin discussions about what school boards must do on their own and what activities school boards can share in order to reduce duplication of overhead and other costs.

The Ministry of Education has begun an internal review of our relationship with school boards. We are examining whether the present levels of shared responsibility will continue to serve the needs of an education system that is being reshaped and revitalized both in its programs and in its finances. We want to know what changes could be made so that together the ministry and school boards can deliver a more equitable, more accountable education system that is rooted in excellence.

In each of the three areas, program, finance and governance, I am pleased to report that considerable progress reflecting our principles has been made and will continue in 1992-93. Much of what we will accomplish will advance the agenda for equity, which is certainly a key issue for the future of education in Ontario. This government sees greater equity in Ontario's economic and social structure as a matter of fundamental justice, and as such, a key to the partnerships needed to build economic renewal. Equity is there for an important strategic objective in education.

A major consultation process was initiated during the year, concerning the integration of students with special needs into local classrooms and schools. Integration is an issue of fundamental equity and therefore a priority of the Ministry of Education. Our integration consultation paper, which was released in January, is giving us the input from school boards, special interest groups and individuals that will allow us to move quickly towards greater integration. Our objective is to make the integration of exceptional pupils into regular classrooms the preferred option for a student's education wherever possible, when it meets the student's needs and when it is the parents' choice. As a result, all school boards in the province will be required to take their first steps towards greater integration by September of next year. Some boards have already taken these steps.

Equity is also a primary concern as we make significant progress on program reform in Ontario schools. Junior kindergarten programs will be available through all school boards by 1994. This reflects our belief that children in this province should have access to education as early as reasonably possible.

I recently sent school boards details of our plan to begin reform of education programs from junior kindergarten to grade 9. We're starting with grades 7, 8 and 9. The plan calls for school boards to introduce new programs for these grades in September 1993 and to achieve full implementation of these programs within three years. These programs will bring new emphasis to the results of education. They will be based on a clear definition of what we expect students in these grades to learn: the essential knowledge, concepts and skills that they should acquire. Curriculum documents that identify these core learning outcomes for all levels, up to and including grade 9, will be released in the fall of this year.

The development of the provincial Benchmarks Project will play an important role in this new emphasis on results. Benchmarks will provide parents and teachers with detailed but clear descriptions of our expectations. The destreaming of grade 9, eliminating the separation of students into basic, general or advanced classes, is another vital component of this emphasis on results. It will also enable us to phase out dead-end programs that do not lead to decent jobs or later learning, to stop labelling students and lowering hopes and expectations for them, and to demonstrate a further commitment to the pursuit of equity and excellence together.

Destreaming and the broader program of reform will also support the action we are taking on a number of fronts to address issues of anti-racism and ethnocultural equity in our school system. As the Stephen Lewis Report on Race Relations in Ontario noted, curriculum reform and destreaming are issues of vital importance to minority students.

We will continue to demonstrate our commitment to literacy and basic skills training in 1992-93. In 1991-92 the ministry provided $15.3 million for literacy programs and services for adults throughout the province and to help workers who needed to improve communication, reading, writing, basic numeracy signs and basic computer skills.

To date in 1992-93 the ministry has already announced $28.4 million in funding for Ontario basic skills programs which provide a broad range of basic skills training in reading, writing, mathematics and science to grade 12 equivalency, as well as computer literacy, life skills and work adjustment skills.

The ministry, in cooperation with our education partners in communities, will move forward on a number of fronts to address issues of anti-racism and ethnocultural equity in our school system. As you know, Bill 21 will require all school boards to develop and submit for ministry approval policies on anti-racism and ethnocultural equity.

Also, a new assistant deputy minister position responsible for anti-racism and ethnocultural equity has been established within the Ministry of Education. This senior staff person will provide leadership in the Ministry of Education to ensure the development and implementation of a truly anti-racist curriculum throughout Ontario schools; the development, implementation and monitoring of school boards and ministry corporate policies on anti-racism, ethnocultural and employment equity; and effective in-house ministry training for anti-racism and ethnocultural equity.

Together with the Ontario women's directorate, we launched a series of pilot projects designed to assist students who witness family violence. This is unfortunately a growing phenomenon in Ontario. Affected children suffer in a number of ways, from poor performance and behaviour in school to psychological adjustment problems generally, to the risk of being assaulted themselves.

Social workers in eight school board areas are now developing programs focusing on family violence in general and wife assault and the effects on children in particular. Some of the programs already being provided include family violence prevention activities, individual group counselling and/or referral and liaising with various agencies to create a school agency support network.

We've introduced three new initiatives to mark a significant strengthening of the province's commitment to native education: a new native-language policy requiring school boards, as of this September, to offer native languages programs when the parents or guardians of 15 or more students request instruction in a native language and a qualified native-language teacher is available; a new native studies guideline, intermediate division, which outlines a program of native studies for grades 7 and 8 which explores community organizations, social change and social conflict in the Canadian context from a native perspective; and a computer software program for the Cree language -- which is now available -- that not only displays a syllabic text but also speaks to the user so that he or she can learn both visually and orally. The program utilizes both Eastern Cree and Western Ojibway Cree syllabic texts. We also provided funding of $1.15 million for demonstration projects in aboriginal education.

As I'm sure members know, a one-person commission appointed by the ministry was able to provide the framework for an agreement that can ultimately resolve the serious school accommodation problems in Ottawa. As a result, we released $20.21 million in capital grants for 1994-95 which had been frozen pending recommendation of the commissioner to the Carleton Board of Education and the Carleton Roman Catholic Separate School Board.

Following the release of the results of provincial reviews of student achievement and teaching practices in mathematics at the grade 8, grade 10 general and grade 12 advanced levels, the ministry announced three initiatives. The review results showed that on average our students perform well enough on basic skills but are clearly having trouble applying these basic skills to more complex mathematical tasks and situations that call for creative problem-solving. Initiatives are the preparation of action plans for English-language and French-language schools that can be implemented by the next school year. The development of these plans include a review of curriculum guidelines, resources for mathematics instruction and teacher education practices. School boards, teachers and universities are playing key roles, and we are reviewing mathematics programs in schools and boards that have better-than-average results.

Second, priority is being given to the development of mathematics benchmarks for grades 3, 6 and 9. The benchmarks will clearly define critical learning outcomes that most students can reasonably be expected to achieve at key points in their education. They will serve as standard reference points for the province, boards, schools and the public.

Third, there is collaboration with local French-language school boards and sections to make improvement of math and science programs a priority of the French-language consultative service which the ministry provides to school boards.

Ontario, as members know, is also taking part in a national school achievement indicators program, which we initially declined to join. This decision to participate resulted from an agreement by the Council of Ministers of Education -- Canada, to make significant changes in the programs, goals and design. The changes reflected Ontario's position on three major issues: The program will be based on each province's curriculum requirements; it will allow provinces to choose samples that reflect each province's demographic makeup, and provinces will be able to consult with educators, school boards and parents about the content of the tests.

We will further our partnerships with school boards to enable them to operate more effectively. For example, we are making a total of $50.2 million available to support structural change in Ontario's school system. These funds will be used to support initiatives and partnerships developed through employer-employee cooperation.

Three main project categories are eligible for funding: labour adjustment initiatives to make the collective bargaining process more flexible and to preserve jobs and programs; employer-employee plans to restructure school board operations to achieve cost savings, and administrative cooperation involving school boards and other agencies such as municipalities, hospitals and social service agencies and organizations. A portion of the funds are available for boards in the same area to obtain computer hardware and software to help plan the sharing of school bus routes.

I also participated in extensive consultation with representatives of local educational communities following the January announcement of the 1%, 2% and 2% increases in school board transfer payments for 1992-93 and the following two years. We sought the insights and opinions of students, parents, teachers, trustees and school board staff on how we could be deal with this difficult financial situation.

A number of positive outcomes resulted from these meetings. Grant ceilings were increased to lessen the impact of the reduced transfer payments on less affluent school boards; we are giving active consideration to adjusting the school board fiscal year beginning in September 1993 so that it would coincide with the school year and also coincide with the beginning of the education finance reform that I referred to earlier, and as I explained early in this presentation, education finance reform is being fast-tracked.

This essentially completes my overview in support of the Ministry of Education's estimates for the 1992-93 fiscal year. There are a number of areas I've touched on and indeed a number of areas I haven't gone into any detail on, and I look forward, in the exchange that will follow in the days to come, to sharing in more detail some observations and, obviously, to hearing from members their comments and criticisms of what we are doing.

I'm sure you will agree with me that our strategic direction makes sense, given economic and social conditions -- or you may not agree with that and that will obviously be part of the discussion we will have. But I believe we are well on our way to an equitable, accountable education system which continues and needs to continue to be rooted in excellence. Thank you for listening.