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| Ontario | 36e | 1e | Discours sur l’éducation | 12 décembre 1995 | John Snobelen | Minister of Education and Training | Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario |

Thank you, Mr Chair, members of the estimates committee. I'm very pleased to have this opportunity to discuss the Ministry of Education and Training and its commitment to developing an education system that's based on excellence in student achievement and accountability to all Ontario taxpayers and to developing a training system that is geared to Ontario's needs for economic renewal.

In short, I'm talking about affordability, accountability and quality in the public education and training system. We want a system that is transparent, that will let the public clearly see what we're doing, how we're doing it and what results we're getting.

As my colleague Mr Eves pointed out in his economic statement, Ontario taxpayers have told us what they want. They want a secure and prosperous future for their children and they want schools where children actually learn.

At the Ministry of Education and Training, our priorities should be as much about preparing our young people for the future as they are about preparing the future for our young people.

We are in the knowledge age. By the end of the century, our province will need very different types of workers than it does today and it's up to our education system to prepare our youth for that future.

But just as important as preparing our children for the future, we must not burden them with a mortgaged future. The system must be reformed, but this must be done within the fiscal realities which have been forced upon us by a decade of overspending.

And so I want to talk for a few minutes about accountability. In plain language, we're talking about being responsible for what we do and being answerable to the citizens of Ontario who carry the load and pay the freight.

For too long, Ontario has been spending beyond its means. Mr Eves spelled out the harsh realities of our situation. In the last 10 years, government spending has almost doubled while accumulated debt has almost tripled. We are spending enormous amounts of money just carrying the debt. In fact, right now, Ontario's interest bill translates into almost $800 a year for every man, woman and child in Ontario. As a result of the fiscal situation it inherited, this government spends $1 million an hour more than it receives in revenues.

That enormous debt is unfair to our young people who would be burdened with paying it off. It is unfair because, if not reduced, in 10 or 15 years that huge debt would force the government of the day to eliminate many of the social programs that we enjoy today. So the younger generation would be betrayed on two counts.

Except that we're not going to allow that to happen. The government's first priority, therefore, is to get the province back on track financially. We must reduce Ontario's crushing debt so that we can improve the climate for job creation. It is only with a healthy economy that we can achieve the growth necessary to protect essential services.

Education is an essential service. But there is still money to be saved in the way we deliver it, and we will save that money.

In his economic statement, Mr Eves announced a reduction of $400 million to school boards for 1996-97, which means they will receive $4.04 billion. This reduction represents 3% of the total cost of operating Ontario's schools.

In 1996-97, transfers to universities will be approximately $1.5 billion, a reduction of $280 million. Transfers to colleges for the same period will be $689 million, a reduction of some $120 million.

We believe that we can protect the quality of classroom-based education while reducing the overall cost of the education system. And we are happy to note that we are not alone in this opinion. In a November 30 news release, the president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association was quoted as saying, and I quote, "Extracting $400 million from the elementary and secondary education system is a formidable challenge, but school boards must meet that challenge and continue their work in providing quality programs for our children at the best price for the property taxpayer."

The president of OPSBA then emphasized the importance of collaboration by saying, and I quote: "We have an obligation to our children to ensure the best quality education but to also work responsibly with the provincial government to ensure they do not inherit an overwhelming debt. The Ontario Public School Boards' Association will continue to work in partnership with its partners and the government to find cost-saving measures."

These are very encouraging sentiments, considering how urgently we need to reduce our spending on education. My ministry spends $9.174 billion a year to support education operating and capital requirements in this province.

You will note this figure is different than the printed estimates. The reason for the difference is the number has been updated to exclude the July 21 reductions and include the ministry's loan-based capital for schools, universities and colleges. As this capital was loan-based at the beginning of the year, it was not included in my ministry's estimates.

Of that $9.174 billion, 98.2% is paid out in transfer payments. Those operating and capital transfer payments amount to $9.009 billion.

Let me point out a few more financial facts. From 1985 to 1995, enrolment in Ontario schools increased by 16.5%. For the same period, the general legislative grants from the government to the boards increased by 39.2%. But school board operating costs increased by 82.3%.

Or how about these figures? In 1994-95, Ontario spent $600 more per student than the average of all the other provinces. With more than two million students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools, that adds up to $1.3 billion annually that Ontario spends above that per-student average. Furthermore, there's a wide variance among school boards in Ontario in their spending on administration.

We support investing money in student learning but we must insist that money spent on administration and bureaucracies be cut to what's needed to support student learning, and no more.

We intend to make the education system more accountable. And we must make sure the resources we have are well deployed and efficiently used.

As you know, the Ontario School Board Reduction Task Force, headed by John Sweeney, is currently in the process of examining the structure of our school board system to determine if we can achieve cost savings through the amalgamation of boards. Mr Sweeney will provide a final report to me by the end of the year.

Whatever the report indicates, let me be clear that we will bring about savings by working with trustees so that boards share resources and use those resources wisely and prudently with a view to achieving savings for the taxpayers in this province.

We must also seriously consider the number of, and compensation for, school board trustees. The Sweeney report will give us guidance in this regard.

Although some cooperation is under way now -- and we applaud the efforts of those boards that are working to reduce duplication -- we know there is far more that can be done by school boards in this province.

The taxpaying public has told us that they want better value for their tax dollars, and the education system can certainly improve in this area. The public, however, is not willing to settle for a second-best system. They want to know that we are providing a first-class education to our young people. They want a highly educated and well-trained workforce that is ready to meet the challenges of the new economy.

That will mean updating technology in our schools and closing the gap between students who are exposed to technology outside the classroom and those who are not.

The taxpaying public has told us they want clear accountability through testing and public reporting of results. They want to be assured that our teachers get the best possible professional development throughout their careers. I will have more to say about this later when I outline our plans for a self-funded Ontario College of Teachers.

We are going to deliver on these needs expressed by the public. And we believe we can do it with a leaner, more efficient education system.

The people of Ontario have told us that they want an end to political turf battles. They've told us they want government at all levels to act more like partners than political adversaries. We are prepared to do so because we believe it's the only way we can pull the province out of the financial mess it's currently in.

We believe spending reductions must be resolved by the school boards and the ministry working together. We know that many people involved with education have already given some thought to how things could work in the future, and my parliamentary assistants and I have heard some very creative ideas.

We are particularly encouraged by the fact that groups such as the Metro Toronto school boards, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association and the Secondary School Teachers' Federation have outlined ways that major savings could be made.

In its report Removing the Barriers to Cost-Effective Education, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association has suggested things like allowing school boards to use other professionals in the schools in such areas as recreation or school libraries, allowing school boards to determine the timing of the school day in accordance with community needs, and phasing out retirement gratuities.

We should work together with boards, associations and employee groups to review all possible avenues for administrative cost savings.

We also want to work closely with my ministry's education partners to make sure they have the tools they need to implement the necessary reductions. With regard to school boards, we hope to make an announcement in January about final decisions for expenditure reductions. This will give us time to hear a variety of views and ideas from across the province.

We are deeply committed to an education system that delivers excellence.

We said in the Common Sense Revolution that, "Education reform is essential if Ontario's next generation is to find high-paying, productive jobs in increasingly competitive world markets." We believe this is true now more than ever.

In response to this need, my ministry is making progress. I would like to briefly touch on some of the reforms we have under way, reforms that have at their core accountability, affordability and quality.

Recently, we announced major reforms to our secondary school program that will make it more relevant to the needs of students and of the businesses that will hire them when they have completed their education.

As we promised in the Common Sense Revolution and as supported by the previous government, we will bring our secondary school graduation requirements in line with other school systems throughout Canada and the rest of the world so that students can complete high school in four years. This will be implemented beginning with students entering grade 9 in 1997.

As the Royal Commission on Learning pointed out, there is no evidence to suggest that an extra year of high school results in better student achievement. Current graduation requirements will be revised to reflect the move to a four-year system.

We will maintain our standards for university-bound students, but will put more emphasis on meeting the needs of the 70% of students who are not going on to university. We will develop clear course requirements for those students who choose to go to college or to go directly to work.

We will expand co-op and work experience programs to give students more insight into possible career choices. We will introduce a formal transition-to-work training program in partnership with local employers.

We will also make changes and improvements to our guidance counselling system so that students will have the best career and education information available to enable them to make informed choices about their careers and futures.

My ministry will work with an external advisory committee to implement these changes in the secondary school system. Members will include parents, educators and representatives from colleges, universities, businesses and the broader community.

There ae a number of other education reform initiatives which I will touch on briefly.

The Ontario College of Teachers, which we announced two weeks ago, will oversee and ensure the continued professional development of our teachers. The establishment of a college of teachers is designed for teachers, but it will also be valuable to our taxpayers and students. It is yet another way of making our education system more accountable and professional.

All partners in our system have the knowledge that there are supports in place so that educators can continue to be as current as possible in the classrooms and in leadership roles in education. Teachers have told me that they need and want this for their own self-development.

Through the college, students, parents and taxpayers will know what standards of performance to expect from teachers and how teachers are conducting their own professional development. The college will go a long way in contributing to excellence in teaching, which is one of the most basic requirements for overall excellence in education.

We are delivering on a concept that has been recommended by the Royal Commission on Learning and the Hall-Dennis report of some 25 years ago, as well as being recognized by the previous government as an important initiative.

It will be an independent, self-funding, professional college of teachers that will ensure excellence in teaching and improve accountability as well as confidence in the public education system. It will set out clear standards of practice and a framework of career-long professional learning for teachers.

The proposed structure and mandate of the college are consistent with other professional, self-regulating bodies, such as those for nurses, doctors, lawyers and chartered accountants.

Accountability will be enhanced by the requirement for public representation on the college's governing council and all committees, as well as by regular reporting to the minister and college members.

My government also announced in November that we will introduce comprehensive testing through an independent agency, the Education Quality and Accountability Office, which is a first for Canada. As recommended by the Royal Commission on Learning, this will be an arm's-length agency whose sole responsibility will be to monitor and report to the public on the performance of the education system.

It will create tests and manage the testing of students to monitor the progress of our children in the education system. It will report publicly on how our children are doing. The first task will be to test all grade 3 students in reading, writing and mathematics, starting next school year. We will also test all students in grade 11 and take samples in grades 6 and 9. In addition, the agency will manage the provinces's participation in national and international tests.

This testing will give us valuable, accurate and credible information on the state of learning in Ontario schools. The agency will be a catalyst for making improvements to the education system.

It will do these things at a much lower cost to the taxpayer than was originally proposed by the former government. The funding for this agency will come from the ministry's allocation.

Technology is key to improving efficiency in the delivery of education, in ensuring equitable access to education across the province and in helping students achieve high standards. The effective use of information technology can help lower administrative costs and foster a greater sharing of resources between schools and between school boards. Savings realized will allow for the shifting of education resources towards the classroom.

We are committed to updating the level of technology in all schools and school boards across the province. We will do this through a variety of approaches, not the least of which includes building partnerships to encourage private sector contributions. Business support and collaboration are essential to providing the technology we need without increasing the cost to taxpayers.

These kinds of partnerships are also necessary to help us close the gap between those kids who are exposed to technology outside of school and those who are not. Through partnerships with business we can give every child in this province the same opportunity to learn with information technology.

Computers are only part of information technology. Educators throughout the province are moving now from using computers as merely tools to teach computer skills, to using information technology to teach children to access and distribute knowledge. That's the exciting part of information technology.

My government is committed to establishing a demanding, province-wide core curriculum and high standards for student achievement. Parents and the public are demanding clear information on what students are expected to learn in all grades.

We are working on a province-wide curriculum that will make students' programs more consistent throughout the province and will cut the immense duplication of effort that has been rampant in the system. In addition, we will be finalizing province-wide standards for language and mathematics for grades 3, 6 and 9.

We recognize, however, that more is needed. We will be moving ahead with the development of standardized report cards for the province. This will bring greater clarity and consistency to reporting to parents and to the public, meeting our goal of greater accountability.

The ministry is also moving forward on the issue of school councils. We believe school councils help schools and school boards forge strong links with their community partners, including parents, business, labour, social and health service providers.

Parents don't want to run the schools, but they don't want to blindly trust schools absolutely. They want transparency in the operation of schools. They want to see clearly how they are being run and how their children are being taught.

We are supporting the implementation of school councils through training sessions for principals, which are now under way, and for school board facilitators, which will happen in the spring of 1996. We also expect to release a school council handbook next month which will help guide the operation of school councils.

These, then, are the education reform initiatives that are on track for implementation. Now let me turn to some other activities we have undertaken to ensure that our education and training system is accountable, affordable and of high quality.

In the area of education finance reform, we continue to work towards developing a new way of funding, one that meets the needs of an education system that is much more complex than when the current model was developed almost 20 years ago.

We need a new funding model that better addresses two critical principles: equality of educational opportunity for all students in Ontario and equality of tax burden on local ratepayers. Our goal is to achieve a system that is fairer, more equitable and focused on the classroom.

A working group, with representatives of school trustee organizations, school business officials, teacher and support staff unions, my ministry and the Ministry of Finance, will submit a report to me next month with their recommendations.

Clearly, there will be need to be links between the work of this group and that of the Sweeney task force and of the Greater Toronto Area Task Force, known as the Golden task force.

As promised in the Common Sense Revolution and the throne speech, we will make the provision of junior kindergarten optional so that local school boards can make decisions based on local needs.

Under the previous governments, junior kindergarten was mandatory and funded at 100% of grant. Now junior kindergarten will be a local option and we will share the cost with local school boards that decide to offer the program. Boards offering junior kindergarten will be funded at the same rate as they are for other programs of that board.

Another area where local needs may be met is in programs for adult students. Effective September 1996, adult students 21 years of age and over who are currently enrolled in regular day school programs will be funded under continuing education programs.

Adult education will continue to be important to the long-term economic health of Ontario for the foreseeable future. This change in funding will offer boards the same kind of flexibility in staffing for all adult programming as they currently have in their evening continuing education programs.

We also want to promote cooperation among local boards. We believe that levels of service can be maintained or even improved by getting people to cooperate in ways they haven't done in the past. For example, approximately $1 billion is spent annually on transportation, purchasing and other administrative services. By working together, boards could make important savings in this area.

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association, in its recent report, has identified some $1 billion that could be saved. I call that a very good start. We are currently reviewing a number of proposals from boards, associations and employee groups that identify how we can achieve significant savings in ways that don't have a major effect on the classroom. We hope to have all of these by the end of this year.

In the post-secondary sector, it is clear that the future fiscal environment is going to be quite different from what it has been. Our colleges and universities, like all others that receive transfer payments from the government, will be faced with the challenge of a new fiscal era.

In 1996-97, colleges and universities will still be receiving more than $2 billion, but the college sector will receive $120 million less than previously and the universities will receive $280 million less. These reductions are necessitated by Ontario's need to reduce expenditures and by the fact that the federal government is cutting its transfer payments to Ontario.

Government can no longer afford to fund all of the things it has in the past. We are going to have to focus our funding on those things that are most important. At the same time, we recognize the need for the availability of more post-secondary education to provide people with the necessary skills to compete in the global workplace.

Cuts to the transfer payments will be partially mitigated by increases to tuition fees. These increases won't offset the entire amount of the cuts, but students will be paying a fairer share of the costs of the education they receive. This has been the trend over the past decade.

It also follows that students should have a say in how their money is being spent and their education is being managed. We intend to make sure that students are included in discussions around changes to post-secondary education.

College tuition fees will rise by 15% in 1996-97, to $1,275. For universities, basic tuition fees for 1996-97 will increase by 10%. As a result, basic tuition fees for undergrad arts and science students will be $2,386. University tuition will be partially deregulated, which means that universities will be able to increase tuition fees by a further 10%, at their discretion. Both colleges and universities will be asked to direct 10% of any new revenues from tuition increases for local student aid. The Ministry of Education and Training will work with both colleges and universities to deregulate foreign student fees as quickly as possible. At the same time, care will be taken to ensure that there are sufficient places for domestic students.

The government is now looking at making changes to OSAP to give students a better opportunity to manage the debt loads they may incur. An announcement on this issue will be made later on.

We will also be looking at allowing the public institutions more freedom to become entrepreneurial by removing some of the restrictions we now place on them.

In terms of the future, we will be releasing a discussion paper in the new year. The paper will address issues such as student and provincial shares of post-secondary funding, including differentiation of fees for professional and graduate programs, accessibility, program rationalization within each sector and cooperation between the college and university sectors.

The ministry will be undertaking a four- to six-month consultation process about the discussion paper. We believe it's important to get the views of those who are running the system and those who are using it. These are the people who have close knowledge of what works and what doesn't work, and we want to hear what they have to say. We want to know how they think the fiscal challenges can best be met.

In the post-secondary francophone system, we will support efficiency through the Franco-Ontarian Distance Education Network. This is a collaborative project of the three French-language colleges and the four bilingual universities using videoconferencing and other distance education technology to increase access to education by sharing human and financial resources.

In the area of training, the ministry is winding down the Jobs Ontario Training program but honouring commitments already made.

We are reviewing our directions for Ontario's training system with a view to developing a training strategy and structure that will reflect the government's social and economic objectives. Certainly, the business community will figure very prominently in our plans.

OTAB's programs and services are being reviewed. In the interim, its governance structure has been streamlined.

We will continue with the establishment of local boards, with changes to reduce the anticipated costs.

My ministry is working with the Council of Ontario Universities and the Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario to establish the Advanced Training Consortium. This consortium will facilitate, promote and coordinate joint education and training ventures between colleges and universities. It will foster student mobility and credit transfers between institutions.

We will consult with other ministries, including Health and Economic Development and Trade, to confirm what advanced training priorities are key to Ontario's economic renewal.

These initiatives are being carried out with the understanding that we must rationalize the money we spend so that we are getting the best value for our tax dollars, so we are providing the best education and training system we can afford.

We believe we can improve the education and training system in Ontario while reducing overall spending.

The government is making real spending reductions that signify real change, because failure to do so would demonstrate appalling indifference to the needs of every individual in this province. It would be immoral not to take this responsibility very seriously.

There will be tough choices to be made today because they were not made yesterday. No one likes to say no, but because governments over the past decade never said no, we now have an absolute responsibility to prepare the future for our children.

This government will spend less, but spend smarter. And we are and will be asking our transfer payment partners to do the same. It will not be easy for any of us, but it can be done and it must be done. In the end, we'll have a better education system that meets the needs of the people it serves: children getting an education and the taxpayers of Ontario.

We are committed to getting spending under control and getting the cost of the debt off the backs of Ontarians, and off the backs of future generations. This is the only way to stop the treadmill of continuing recession and unemployment.

The people of Ontario have told us what they want, and we have promised to honour their trust in us.