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I'm not sure if this will take half an hour or not, but I do have a few pages, so it might take a little bit of time to go through in terms of an introduction. I thought it would be worthwhile to talk a little bit about the education system in general and some of the situations we face.

Mr Chair, members of the estimates committee, I'm very pleased to have this opportunity to discuss the Ministry of Education and Training and our plans to create in Ontario a first-class education and training system not just for the present generation of students, but also of course we're most interested in generations to come. We are creating, I believe, a system that will be a lasting benefit to our children and our grandchildren. That's why we are committed to improving student achievement at all levels of our education and training system in the most cost-effective way.

Time and again, parents and students have told this government and its predecessors that they are concerned about the quality of education and training and how their tax dollars are spent. In that vein, I guess in particular in my former capacity as mayor and councillor, I've certainly attended many tax meetings, tax forums, where particularly elderly people and business people, but people in all walks of life have expressed concern about the cost-effectiveness of the system.

Time and again, parents and students have told this government and its predecessors that they are concerned about that quality and how the tax dollars are spent.

In education, one important measure of quality is our students' performance. Up until now, we haven't done a very good job of measuring it, and frankly, that has eroded public trust in our education system. That's why one of our very first moves as a government was to put in place the Education Quality and Accountability Office, which is an external agency designed to test our young people throughout their school lives. Now, for the first time, we have some common measures of how well we're educating our young people, and because of that, parents can now see clearly how their children are progressing.

We also recognized very early that the key component in the educational system is teachers. In order to recognize the professional nature of teaching, we set up the Ontario College of Teachers to enhance the level of expertise they will bring into the classroom.

As Minister of Education and Training, it is my duty to ask some tough questions, such as: Why is our student performance not the best in Canada? Why are our costs higher than those in other provinces? Why do our students spend less time in the classroom than students elsewhere in Canada? Why do our secondary school teachers spend more time out of the classroom than their colleagues in other provinces?

Previous governments dealt with these questions by setting up studies and commissions. There have been 24 separate reviews, 10 commissions and committees, two fact-finding reports, two panels and innumerable meetings to discuss education reform. I think that number has taken place over a considerable period of time. That may date back to 1950, actually. A few of us were in existence at that point; not all of us maybe, but a few of us. Even over this decade, I think there were something like eight different reviews and studies in the education system, and those would be of course quite timely.

It was very clear to us that these issues had been studied to death. Clearly it was time for action, time to make the publicly funded school system more accountable and time to build a system that would provide the answers parents and students need.

We identified the need and then we developed a comprehensive, multifaceted plan to give Ontarians a high-quality education and training system that will give students the knowledge, the skills and the expertise they need to succeed in our global economy today.

In January, the government announced its intention to move Ontario students to the head of the class. We have been meeting that commitment by introducing clear, challenging and consistent province-wide curriculum, regular province-wide testing, and a standard report card.

Our new curriculum is rigorous and demanding. It has year-by-year standards that will raise the standard of education for all students in Ontario. It replaces the previous government's Common Curriculum, with its vague language and multi-year outcomes.

The first components of the new, rigorous curriculum -- math and language -- are already in schools this fall. But that is just the beginning. Curriculum for the remaining subjects, including science and technology -- which will be expected shortly -- history, geography and physical education, will be phased in over the course of the year.

By taking the lead in curriculum, we are responding to parents' concerns that Ontario's students are not keeping pace with their counterparts in other countries and other provinces. We have started our comprehensive testing program, and this fall we received a full report on the results of the first grade 3 test. These results give us a baseline on which to gauge students' progress as they learn the new curriculum.

To give parents a clearer understanding of how their children are doing, we've introduced a new, standard report card to replace the hundreds of different report cards that were being used across the province, which I must say I'm sure many of us have heard of from various parents. Parents in general were not fully satisfied with those different report cards. Parents will receive the report card at least three times a year, and the first report card will be issued before the end of December. This report card matches the grade-by-grade expectations in the new curriculum.

From now on, parents will be able to turn to the curriculum to discuss with teachers their children's strengths and weaknesses based on the curriculum standards, and they'll be able to question teachers about what additional instruction is needed to ensure standards are being met.

In addition, we're introducing a new, four-year high school program similar to that in the other nine provinces and 50 states. The program will be streamed, including grade 9. It will be more challenging. It will encourage our children to reach higher and to develop the skills they need to succeed. This new four-year high school program will start with students who enter grade 9 in September 1999.

In support of our plan for education reform, we have taken forward two pieces of legislation. Earlier this year, as some of us here I'm sure will recall, the Legislature passed the Fewer School Boards Act, 1997, which allowed us to establish a new school board structure and conduct elections for a reduced number of school board positions. Those elections took place over a week ago, on November 10, at which time Ontarians elected trustees for their new district boards which will come into effect on January 1, 1998. When the new district boards come into effect, trustees will be able to concentrate on their core objective, being guardians of education in their communities. School boards will be able to renew their focus on the students in the school and devote their efforts to student achievement, reporting and curriculum implementation.

With the introduction of the Education Quality Improvement Act, 1997, we've taken the next step in the fulfilment of our plan. The bill is intended to fill in the outlines of the new school system set out in the Fewer School Boards Act, 1997. If it is passed, the Education Quality Improvement Act, 1997, would help ensure a smooth transition by improving the quality of our education system, improving the governance of schools, increasing the involvement of parents, and simplifying the financing of the education system. The bill would allow the government to set standards that will promote quality.

The Education Improvement Commission recommended reducing the number of professional activity days during the school year and also reducing the number of exam days in secondary schools. That's why our amendment to Bill 160 reduces professional activity days during the school year from nine to four and examination days from up to 15 to 10 at the secondary level. This would increase the number of days that high school students spend in the classroom from 170 up to 180. I might say that the national average in that regard is 181, in case I don't say it later on, and also that the remaining 10 days of exam time at the secondary level would exceed the national average by two days, with exam days across Canada being an average of eight days in other systems.

At the elementary level, professional activity days during the school year would be reduced from nine to four, which would increase the number of days elementary students spend in the classroom from 185 to 190, which again brings us up to about the national average at the elementary level.

Bill 160 proposes caps to average class sizes, another initiative designed to improve the quality of our students'' education. The average elementary classes would be capped at 25 and the average secondary classes at 22 for each board. In recent years there have been several instances of unions and local school boards bargaining to increase class sizes. We want this practice to stop.

Another thing the bill would do is promote improved student access to professionals with special expertise who can work with and complement the role of teachers. The support from specialists -- for example, in computer technology, arts and career guidance, to name a few -- would be used to complement the instruction provided by teachers and would enrich our children's education and broaden their horizons.

In its recent report, The Road Ahead, the Education Improvement Commission noted that the amount of time students spend on learning is an important factor in determining their achievement levels and their ability to compete with graduates of education systems in other jurisdictions. The EIC found that while Ontario elementary teachers spend the same average number of hours in the classroom as teachers in other provinces, our high school teachers spend considerably less than the national average time in the classroom with their students.

I believe high school teachers should spend more time with their students in the classroom, and we have introduced an amendment that writes directly into legislation the minimum amount of time classroom teachers must spend in the classroom. At the secondary level, teachers would spend about an extra half-hour each day in the classroom teaching students. This would bring them close to the national average, perhaps just a bit below the national average. It's 1,250 minutes per week that would be spent in the classroom. Elementary teachers already teach approximately the same number of hours as the national average, and in the elementary system that's 1,300 minutes per week.

The amendment to the bill would also allow for flexibility at the local level so that principals can distribute instructional time according to the different workloads and experience of teachers.

The bill would help us make the system more accountable to parents. It would make it mandatory for school boards to establish councils in every school. This has already been done in most schools; I think about 95% of the schools. The new bill would make it a legal requirement. School councils would give parents and others in the community interested in education issues a voice in how schools operate both inside and outside the classroom. It is intended that these councils would build on the success of traditional parent-teacher groups and advise principals in many areas, including student discipline, student safety and local priorities.

The bill would also give the province, not school boards, responsibility for setting all education property tax rates. It would introduce a province-wide education tax rate beginning in 1998.

Last year, the people of Ontario spent more than $14 billion on elementary and secondary education. School boards have increased residential property taxes by an average of 7% a year over the past 10 years, which would have doubled the taxes in those 10 years. If these trends continued, residential property taxpayers would be paying $6.2 billion for education by the year 2000. As a result of our bill, residential tax revenues for school purposes would be cut from $5 billion to $2.5 billion and the rates would be frozen.

With these changes, owners of taxable residential property with the same assessed value would pay the same education property tax, before subclass reductions, no matter where the property is. A uniform rate structure for residential properties is fair and is consistent with the government's plan to ensure that students across the province have equal access to high-quality education.

The right of boards and teachers to bargain for a collective agreement is continued in Bill 160. The provisions of the Labour Relations Act will apply, except where there are special provisions for the education sector. Negotiations for a first collective agreement would begin on January 1. Existing terms would continue during the new negotiations. This is a fair approach. It is a reasonable approach.

I want to emphasize that we are committed to improving the quality of education as well as the accountability and cost-effectiveness of the system. To make it work for our students will require the efforts of teachers, school boards, the government and everybody involved in the education system working together. We will work together through the transition to a new, better, more accountable education system for our children. I believe that collectively we have the courage, the strength and the collective wisdom to make a better place for our children. Thank you.