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| Ontario | 36e | 2e | Discours sur l’éducation | 7 octobre 1998 | David Johnson | Minister of Education and Training | Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario |

I welcome the opportunity to talk about the tremendous change and progress in the quality of education and training in the province of Ontario. Our province has undertaken major reforms in education and training systems. In three years we have accomplished a good deal. Ontario still faces many challenges, but we should first, and above all, recognize the success we've had.

For example, by helping almost 61,000 young people find work, Ontario Summer Jobs 1998 helped more young people than any other provincial government summer jobs strategy.

Youth are benefiting greatly from Ontario's strong economic growth. Since February 1997, Ontario's youth have gained almost 46,000 net new jobs. This year Ontario will spend about $200 million on labour market programs for over 154,000 young people, which is about 60% more youth than we served in 1995-96. Ontario has the highest spending on youth employment programs in Canada.

Our elementary students are benefiting from the investment in over 3.2 million new textbooks that support the challenging new provincial curricula for math, language, and science and technology.

Province-wide support for teachers' assistants, librarians, guidance counsellors, as well as tutors in the classroom, has been increased.

This kind of success gives us a solid foundation for building the future, and indeed it is time to look to that future. The key to providing a secure future is to build a strong, competitive economy that will bring jobs and prosperity to Ontario and improve our quality of life. In education and training, our challenge is to build a system that provides the people of Ontario with the skills and knowledge they need to seize the opportunity. We want to prepare every student for success, whether it's in the classroom or in the workplace or throughout their lives.

Today, Ontario is making substantial investments in education and training as a key priority, building tomorrow's prosperity and quality of life through today's actions. Some examples include:

We have recently announced an expansion of the student testing program to include annual province-wide testing of all grade 6 students. Formerly, grade 6 had been tested on a smaller basis and grade 9 was tested this year on a smaller basis, but this will now be all grade 6 students across Ontario. That's another step ensuring that our education system provides the consistency and quality we want everywhere in the province.

Our students will benefit from a dramatic increase in the number of new schools. Our new, student-focused approach to funding will permit school boards to take advantage of long-term financing and start building new schools at a rate 10 times faster than the old system allowed. We reckon that about 200 schools will be under construction in the next three years.

Working in partnership with our community colleges, we are moving forward on performance-based funding, which will reward colleges for providing programs that meet the needs of students and employers. When this is fully implemented, up to 10% of the total funding available to colleges through general-purpose operating grants will be distributed based on performance. I might say that many in the college sector are eagerly awaiting this and wishing to participate. Alberta, by comparison, currently ties about 2% of funding to performance. So when we are at maturity, Ontario will be in a leadership position in Canada, and indeed North America, with respect to basing funding on performance.

We have proposed changes to apprenticeship legislation, which would create work and learning opportunities for thousands of people in Ontario, with the goal of doubling the number of people entering apprenticeship programs to 22,000 from the existing 11,000 per year. There certainly are wonderful opportunities for young people in the apprenticeship program. Whether it's tool and die or cook and baker or some of the newer ones in agriculture and cable networking, they're just wonderful career opportunities and we want our young people to be able to take advantage of these opportunities.

These initiatives are all investments in our future.

Our efforts for elementary and secondary education are to put students first by focusing on quality in the classroom. We are committed to ensuring that Ontario's students will have the best quality education in Canada. Guided by parents, we are focusing on measurable results and benchmarking those against the best in the world. We already benefit from excellent teachers who are very dedicated and provide valued guidance to our students. Our teachers need an excellent system that will support their hard work.

In this school year, parents throughout the province are seeing substantial measures to improve the quality of the education system. This includes Ontario's first new kindergarten program in 50 years, which will outline the knowledge and skills children should develop during their first year of school. For the first time since 1944, there will be consistency in what Ontario children learn in kindergarten, because we believe that children's early learning experiences are too important to be dealt with haphazardly. Now we will have a strong foundation for their future intellectual, physical and social development. An early learning grant guarantees funding to each school for junior kindergarten or other appropriate early learning program. This is the first time that such funding has been guaranteed.

In addition, world-renowned expert Dr Fraser Mustard and child advocate the Honourable Margaret McCain are heading a study of early learning and will make recommendations on how best to prepare young and preschool children for scholastic, career and social success. We expect that report later this year.

The kindergarten curriculum leads to the new, rigorous curriculum for elementary school students. There are clear expectations for each grade. For example, Ontario now has a rigorous science and technology curriculum, the first new elementary science curriculum in 30 years. Students will now be expected not only to learn scientific and technological concepts, but to apply them to everyday life, which I think will be most interesting to the students.

The year-by-year expectations are actually a very key point: The teachers, the students and the parents will know at each grade in each subject what the student should learn and what the teacher should teach. International test results have shown that Ontario students know less about science than students their ages in other countries. The new science and technology curriculum reflects our commitment to upgrade what is being taught in our schools to ensure that our students are ready to compete with the best in the world.

Now that we have clear expectations of what our children will learn, parents have asked for clear, straightforward information about how their children are learning. We have listened and we have responded. A new, easy-to-understand report card will be used in all elementary schools, giving parents better information about their children's progress.

I might say that it's particularly gratifying to us that teachers have been so involved in all these initiatives, whether it's the new curriculum, whether instrumentally involved in actually writing the curriculum; whether it's the report card, where the teachers and educators from across the province are involved in guiding the format and content of the report card, and the electronic report card that is a spinoff of that; or the testing, which is the next topic. The teachers are certainly involved in guiding the testing process and also in marking the testing -- very enthusiastically involved, I might say, in the testing program.

The expanded testing program, as indicated, now in grades 3 and 6, will let parents know how their child is performing, and will also let taxpayers, school boards and government know how well the system is performing, and where we need more focus. Also, beginning this fall, school boards are required to ensure that average class sizes, on a board-wide basis, do not exceed 25 pupils in elementary school classes and 22 pupils in secondary school classes. Elementary students will now have five more days in the classroom, while high school students will receive 10 additional days of instructional time. In both cases, that brings the elementary and the secondary up to the national average. Before this, they were unfortunately receiving fewer instructional days than students in other Canadian provinces.

These measures are all meant to increase the quality of our classrooms and improve our students' learning. The Ontario government has set high standards for our education system, and the only way to ensure that these standards are met is to focus our education dollars on students in the classroom. For the first time in history, classroom spending has been defined and protected. Changes to school boards, administration and funding are all designed to support learning and teaching. In particular, we are ensuring that every student gets a successful start in school and are protecting programs for students with special needs.

Ontario wants all students with special needs to have the support they require to reach their full potential. Ontario's new, student-focused approach to funding provides protected funding for special education, which school boards may use only for special education. This new approach will ensure that students' needs are identified and addressed in a more consistent manner throughout the province.

In addition to fair support for new school construction, school boards will benefit from a total of $574 million for transportation in 1998-99. That's an increase of $14 million over the amount originally announced.

In high school, we are increasing the number of compulsory credits, with a greater emphasis on math, science and language. For the first time, students will be required to take a literacy test in grade 10. I must say, this seems to be applauded by most people in Ontario.

Students will also be expected to prepare an education plan and to link their learning with their career goals, whether those include college or university studies, apprenticeship training or a job following graduation. Working with teachers and guidance counsellors, we will make sure that secondary school students are aware of the wide range of careers available to them. We intend to increase opportunities for young people to learn about careers in skilled trades. This will be included in the career education provided to grade 9 students and will support the network of school guidance counsellors.

We have established programs to help students who plan to go directly to work from secondary school. They need education and training programs that will help them find pathways into the workforce. For example, our youth apprenticeship program offers students the opportunity to train as registered apprentices even while they're completing a high school diploma, so that once they've graduated from high school, they have some of the requirements of the apprenticeship program.

We've also established a bridges to work program, similar to the Ontario youth apprenticeship program in that it combines secondary school education with on-the-job training, but aimed at employment in broader areas outside the existing apprenticeship trades. We want to increase private sector participation in these and similar programs. We will set up a provincial partnership council to help expand co-operative education, work experience and school-to-work programs.

A key step forward in strengthening the pool of skilled workers in Ontario is reform of apprenticeship training. As I indicated earlier, we do intend to double the number of new apprentices. We want to encourage more employers to train apprentices and expand the skills that can be learned through this effective means of training. We intend to give industry greater responsibility for apprenticeship training. New legislation, the first since 1964, I think it was, to be precise, was introduced in June and debated last night, I understand, in my absence. It will provide a framework for our reforms.

Partnerships also underlie job connect, the Ontario government employment preparation program, which does an excellent job of linking employers who want to train with people who want to learn in-demand skills. During the first quarter of the current fiscal year, job connect served more than 20,000 people -- about 24,000 people, if my memory is correct -- which means we are on track to achieve our target of 94,000 in a full year. We expect that fully 80% of these, about 75,000, will be placed in on-the-job training positions or further education. These high expectations reflect our conviction that job connect is a leading program of its kind in Canada.

We are laying out Ontario's plan for tomorrow's job market, to invest at least $9.5 billion over the next 10 years to help meet the job and skill training needs of Ontario workers and businesses in every sector of the economy. In this year's budget, the government took aim at the serious shortage of graduates from our colleges and universities in high-demand engineering and computer science programs. We will invest $150 million over the next three years to implement the access to opportunities program, otherwise known as ATOP, to double the spaces for students in these fields. Operating costs for new spaces will be recognized and funded, with industry matching the government's investment in start-up costs.

In the 1997 budget, Ontario announced an investment of more than $10 million to support training in four critical skill areas that were identified by business. The first was training in auto parts design and manufacturing technology, where there will be a partnership between Georgian College and the Industrial Research and Development Institute; secondly, training in metal machining and other key engineering technologies, through Conestoga College; thirdly, comprehensive business and technology training in the telecommunications industry, through Humber College and the Telecommunications Learning Institute; and finally, new media skills training at the Canadian Film Centre.

In this year's budget, we have dedicated a further $20 million to kick-start other forward-looking skills partnerships. The Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Tourism, in co-operation with my ministry and the Ministry of Energy, Science and Technology, are reviewing projects through a competitive process. The focus of these new skill investments is to create strategic skills essential to the competitiveness of growing industries today. The government's willingness to invest in strategic skills is built on the expectation that all participants, whether it's industry or educators or students, as well as governments, will contribute substantially to the new skills partnerships.

These immediate investments complement the $500-million research and development challenge fund introduced by the government last year. One of the key purposes is to attract and keep world-class researchers right here in Ontario. This goal will be achieved by encouraging partnerships among businesses, universities and other research institutions. Funding has been approved for 18 proposals from the first competition. The government's total investment is over $68 million. All projects also have secured funding from business and industry, and another 10 proposals are still under consideration.

In June, as one example, we announced approval of six proposals from the University of Toronto. These include a partnership between that university and Northern Telecom to expand and enhance the staffing and the physical infrastructure at the Nortel Institute for Telecommunications. This institute provides global leadership in research, training and education in telecommunications, ensuring that Ontario industries maintain their significant competitive edge in this most important sector.

Also through that same challenge fund, the University of Toronto and Bell Emergis will establish the new Bell Emergis university laboratories to develop new technologies for computing, and networks and communications, and to turn these into new commercial products and services. This is a complementary facility to the one already at the University of Waterloo. The two new laboratories will work together on telecommunications research and new product development.

Together these investments fit in with the broader perspective of the new Ontario Jobs and Investment Board, which has been established to help develop a vision for Ontario's long-term economic prosperity. The Ontario Jobs and Investment Board, known as OJIB, is organizing seven regional conferences this month and in November to seek broad participation in developing regional strategies for long-term job creation and economic growth. I am pleased to be a member of that board, and my ministry supports the board's research on the future relationship between learning and jobs in the new millennium.

At the college and university level, in addition to the ATOP program, we are establishing a comprehensive set of benchmarks including graduation rates, placement rates and loan default rates. Students may use this information as a guide as they consider schools and programs in which to invest their money. A key component of accessibility to post-secondary education is giving qualified students the information they need to make decisions about their education.

We are also committed to taking major steps to support qualified students. This year the government is helping over 200,000 students at the post-secondary level through $535-million in spending on student assistance. That represents a 30% increase over 1995-96 spending. The largest share of this amount is in the form of direct grants to students through the Ontario student opportunity grants program, which was introduced this year.

The Ontario student opportunities trust fund initiative, which was launched in 1996, will generate $600 million for student assistance at universities and colleges, and will help 185,000 students over 10 years.

In partnership with the private sector, the Ontario government will reward excellence in studies in science and technology through a new graduate scholarship. Over the next 10 years, $75 million will be awarded to students through this initiative.

We have taken a new approach to post-secondary tuition that establishes greater accountability to the university or college community for the use of tuition fee revenue. It allows colleges and universities to enhance the quality of their programs while providing more funding for student assistance. It also provides greater opportunity to offer programs for qualified students in areas where there is student demand, as well as employer demand for graduates, and substantial starting salaries for those graduates.

Our economy is growing, and we face the challenge of providing Ontarians with the skills and knowledge they need to participate in and to create continuing prosperity. We are addressing this challenge through the reforms we have begun to introduce to Ontario's education system, starting in the early years and kindergarten and continuing through elementary and secondary education, and post-secondary education and training. At all levels, we have not only provided greater opportunity; we have made access to learning opportunities more equitable across the province, based on clear and high standards that will demand not only that our students give their best, but also that they receive our best.

We have invested our resources strategically to support our students, making sure that the priority is on the classroom rather than administration and bureaucracy. We are committed to making an Ontario education an education that offers our students a passport to jobs and hope, opportunity and growth, right into the 21st century. Employers will then have access to the skilled workers they need to compete and succeed in the global marketplace. People will have greater access to training and jobs. Our economy will continue to grow, create jobs, investment and opportunity.

I will say that there are aspects of the quality program that are particularly pleasing to me as a minister. I came into this portfolio about a year ago, with considerable municipal and some provincial experience, but not with background at a school board, let's say, although with background as a parent. But the improvement in the quality, and the response I'm receiving when I'm out and about in terms of the new curriculum, have been phenomenal. People have expressed strong support in terms of designing a new curriculum at the elementary level, and those kinds of comments are now starting to come in at the secondary level, although the secondary level curriculum will not be implemented for another year, beginning 1999, but there is more rigour in it. Parents understand at each grade what the child has learned. Formerly, that was not the case. It might have been the case in grade 3 and grade 6, I guess, but in the intervening grades there was no clear expectation. Parents and teachers felt they were in the dark in that regard.

I think back to a day in early August, I believe -- the middle of the summer, at any rate -- when I attended, just to get a little experience in the marking of the testing that was taking place. The testing is now based on the new curriculum. This was mathematics, of course, that I was attending. The mathematics curriculum was introduced over a year ago.

The thing that caught me by surprise was the enthusiasm of the elementary teachers for the new curriculum, for the fact that there are grade-by-grade expectations and for the fact that this testing process was an excellent professional development tool. So many of them came up to me and expressed the view that they were delighted to be involved in the process because it assisted them in teaching this new curriculum in their classes, which they seem to feel very highly about.

The EQAO, in determining staffing for it, I believe needed somewhere in the vicinity of 1,800 teachers, but there were about 5,500 volunteers to fill these 1,800 spots. When 5,500 elementary teachers step forward to be involved in this process in the middle of the summer, when people might have other things on their minds, I think this shows that they felt very highly about it.

Another aspect, the literacy test, is something that many people in Ontario feel is long overdue at the secondary level. We recognize that some students will need assistance. That's why we have introduced the literacy test at the grade 10 level, with the opportunity that if a student fails, of course, there will be remedial action and another opportunity for a test and, if there's still a failure, more remedial action and more opportunities. But there seems to be strong support that when our students graduate they have a basic level of literacy.

One other aspect of the secondary school curriculum that I don't think was mentioned in my notes but that seems to resonate throughout the province is the volunteer component. This is not new in the world. There are other jurisdictions that have a volunteer component. I believe New Brunswick does -- don't raise this in the House if I'm wrong on that. What we're hoping to achieve through this is that not only will our students have the benefit of a wonderful academic program through the new curriculum, but also the opportunity to become well-rounded citizens.

My experience has been that many young people already exceed the 40 hours, whether it's --

Many students already exceed this, but some students haven't had the opportunity to volunteer. Through this program -- this 40-hour period through the high school period -- I think that all students will get the opportunity and they'll become not only great students and graduates but well-rounded citizens of our province.