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| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Ontario | 37e | 1e | Discours sur l’éducation | 23 novembre 1999 | Janet Ecker/Dianne Cunningham | Minister of Education/Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities | Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario |

Hon Janet Ecker (Minister of Education): To members of the estimates committee, I appreciate the opportunity to give a brief overview of some of our education reforms.

I've spent the last few months since my appointment listening and working with educators, administrators, parents, students in order to move forward with our very important changes. I must say, the learning curve has been very steep, but we are carrying forth the work of the ministry actively and, dare I say, energetically.

I want to begin by saying that I am very proud of our public education system and what it's accomplishing. Our schools provide children with rigorous province-wide standards of education. Our education system offers stable education funding, better career planning and stronger links with the job market.

Nonetheless, a top-quality education system requires a continuous investment of human and financial resources. We must look constantly for ways to do things better and remember that we have the obligation to provide a meaningful and relevant education to students who are growing up in a rapidly changing world.

Our vision is to ensure that Ontarians receive the best education in Canada. We are taking bold steps on many fronts to ensure that students from kindergarten through to the end of high school receive top-quality education. We are committed to providing students with a safe environment characterized by the highest standards, clear expectations and frequent straightforward evaluation.

The Ontario government is deeply committed to the principles of responsibility and accountability. Accordingly, a good place to start would be to briefly review the responsibilities of the ministry.

We established the framework for education in the elementary and high school systems. We developed curriculum policy, determined provincial standards for student achievement, set high school diploma requirements, evaluated and improved learning materials for use in the schools, distributed funds equitably to school boards so they can operate schools, offered distance learning courses through our independent learning centres, made regulations that govern the school year, school calendar, set the organization of schools and school boards and defined the duties of teachers and school board officials.

We operate provincial schools for students who are deaf, blind or deaf-blind. We list private schools and inspect private secondary schools to ensure that they are meeting the standards of instruction.

Overall our elementary and secondary education program aims to achieve three important outcomes: excellence in student achievement; preparation of all students for success in further education, work and community life; and the improvement of Ontarians' ability to compete successfully in the global marketplace.

Earlier this year the Ontario Jobs and Investment Board released a major report, A Roadmap to Prosperity. Among other things the report noted:

"A highly skilled, well-educated workforce is currently one of Ontario's key economic advantages and will be even more crucial in the future. The knowledge and skills Ontarians bring to their work can help create the strong and diversified economy we have today. The challenge for the new millennium is to enhance our ability and confidence to adapt to a changing work environment and maximize our opportunities as individuals and as a province."

For this ministry, it means meeting the current educational needs of students and at the same time anticipating what they will need in order to realize their full potential in the rapidly changing world of tomorrow, a world that we know will be a wired world of instant information, e-mails, the Internet, new technologies. We know that our economy in this country will be more technology based, more knowledge dependent. We expect that work and employment patterns will keep changing and that today's students will be graduating into jobs that don't even exist today.

How do we make sure that public education helps prepare students for that tomorrow? We start with four key building blocks.

The first consists of excellent teachers, backed by resources focused in the classroom. Teachers indeed are the backbone of the system. We rely on them to motivate students, to excite them intellectually, to encourage their curiosity, creativity and critical thinking.

We all know and appreciate what a profound difference a good teacher can make in the life of a young person. Good teaching requires many skills and much knowledge, but most important is the ability to reach out to young people and awaken them to the world in which we live.

I have great respect for the commitment and dedication of our teachers. We support them in many ways, including professional resources, ongoing school-based teacher training, summer institutes. We want to ensure that our teachers are the best qualified and most highly skilled in the country.

That is why our government intends to also develop a teacher testing program, in consultation with teachers and other stakeholders in the education system. We will consult broadly on this point and look for best practices in other jurisdictions and in other professions to ensure that we can get it right and achieve our goals.

I know to some teacher testing may sound threatening, but that is certainly not the intent. We want to ensure that teachers stay as up to date as possible so they can meet the challenging needs of our young people. Remaining on the cutting edge of one's profession is not a challenge that is unique to teaching. Many professionals have to upgrade their skills over the course of their careers. Paying close attention to ongoing professional development is a question of quality assurance and accountability.

The second building block in making our education system the best it can be consists of forging productive relationships with all of the stakeholders. This includes teachers, of course, as well as students, parents and taxpayers. There will always be different points of view about how to build a quality education system, but as long as we keep the lines of communication open, these differences can be healthy. As minister, I am committed to working with these groups to indeed achieve our goals.

One example I'd like to raise with you is that it's widely acknowledged that there is a need to find more employers interested and willing to give students meaningful work experiences before they leave school in order to assist them in making the transition from school to work. Some of Ontario's top business and community leaders have joined forces with the ministry to make advances in this area.

Earlier this month, my colleague Dianne Cunningham and I announced that the province has launched a new campaign to encourage employers to do this. Known as the Passport to Prosperity, this initiative is helping school boards offer interested students the opportunity to learn through hands-on training or experience. This initiative builds on the work we began last April with the Provincial Partnership Council. Their aim is to recruit employers to create more school-to-work opportunities. Members include employers from across the province and CEOs from the private and public sectors. The new council is committed to working with schools and community organizations so that students will gain this valuable experience. The newly formed Ontario Learning Partnership Group-local industry councils and training boards-will support the work of the council.

The third building block is the investment that we make in the system. We want our education system to help children develop the skills and motivation to think, to learn, to adapt and to grow, and we want to equip our young people with the skills they need to do this. We know that a high-quality public education system is one of the most important social investments that any government can make.

Some of the concrete examples of how we're investing in the system include education funding that is increased by more than $100 million this fiscal year. In this school year also we will spend at least $1.2 billion on special education. That amounts to $32.5 million more than in the previous year and more than ever before in the history of this province.

Last year, we provided school boards with dedicated full funding for half-day junior kindergarten and this year 69 of 72 boards offer JK. We provide funding to the remaining boards for alternative early learning programs.

We had a special, one-time, top-up investment of $100 million to buy new textbooks for elementary school students. We will provide an additional $30 million this year for grade 9 books and another $30 million next year for grade 10 textbooks.

To support students and teachers in making the transition to a new four-year high school system, we will provide a total of $150 million this year and next for textbooks, teacher training, professional resources and extra support for students.

Funding for new schools will grow to $188 million this school year. This funding will support the construction of new school facilities, and we are making significant investments in classroom construction. Sixty-one new schools or additions to existing schools will open just in this school year alone.

We've allocated $50 million of the SuperBuild Growth Fund to help school boards manage pressing capital needs related to health and safety.

I've been describing the building blocks of a good education system, and the fourth, and final, block has to do with accountability. It applies to students, teachers, trustees, school board officials, as well as the government itself. Each of us must be responsible for our actions and open to public scrutiny.

To improve public accountability in our system, we've taken a number of steps: We've reduced the number of boards from 129 to 72, thus cutting down on bureaucracy; reduced the number of school board politicians by two thirds; limited trustee allowances, and we began the process of focusing education dollars directly on students and teachers in the classroom.

The old system of funding involved 34 different types of grants and formulas and allocations. It was overly complex, obscure to parents and taxpayers, and quite frankly it did not work as well as it should. We brought in a new student focus funding system that is simpler and fairer. Now each school board receives the same base level of per pupil funding. Parents and taxpayers can clearly see how boards are spending those dollars. Funding is based on enrolment and the needs of students, not on the tax base of the local community.

We also included a $1.2-billion class-size protection fund to limit average class sizes on a board-wide basis to 22 students at the secondary level and 25 at the elementary level. As a result, average class size has declined. Only a handful of boards exceeded the average last year and we don't expect any to be above the standard this year. School boards will have to report on how they've used the money we've provided, and these financial report cards will be published for the first time next year.

But there are other aspects of a high-quality education system which we are moving forward on. More than a year ago, we asked Dr Mustard and the Honourable Margaret McCain to advise us on how to prepare Ontario's young people for success in school, at work and in life in general. The Premier released their report this spring and the study confirms that brain development in the first six years of a child's life sets the foundation for future learning behaviour and health. The study presents a long-term strategy for improving outcomes for our children and reminds us that all sectors of society have a role to play in supporting early childhood development.

We've responded in a number of ways to these recommendations: by fully funding half-day JK, as I indicated; by creating community-based demonstration projects to evaluate different approaches to early learning; by setting up an early years task group which will develop a framework for community-based early childhood development and parenting programs. Once the framework is established, we will have an early years challenge fund to match dollar for dollar private and voluntary sector contributions to the early years programs

Our commitment to increasing the quality of education in schools begins with our youngest children and continues through elementary and high school. We've developed and begun implementing a new curriculum for elementary students. The new curriculum sets out clear expectations of what children should learn. It establishes new grade-by-grade standards in all subjects and sets higher academic standards and expectations. It's brought the first wholesale change in the elementary science program in 30 years and for the first time elementary students are studying technology in every grade.

This fall, we began phasing in our new high school program and curriculum for students entering grade 9. The program has a stronger emphasis on math, language, sciences, and more focus on co-operative education and school-to-work programs.

Finally, to carry through on our commitment to greater accountability we've introduced standard province-wide tests in math and language in grades 3 and 6, and this will be expanding. The testing, I should note, doesn't replace teacher evaluation, but measures achievement and helps us compare ourselves to each other and to other jurisdictions.

We've also introduced a standard elementary school report card with clear, concise information about each student's progress. This year, we are extending this initiative to secondary schools, starting with grade 9.

We've made many strides in reforming Ontario's education system in the past four years, but more needs to be done. The Premier announced earlier this year the creation of a Charter of Education Rights and Responsibilities to clearly identify what students, teachers and parents need to do to produce excellence in education.

As well, teachers can't teach and students can't learn unless schools guarantee a safe, secure and respectful environment. To achieve this, we've proposed several initiatives. For example, we plan to introduce a province-wide code of conduct for students that would make expulsion automatic for students who bring weapons to school, provide drugs or alcohol to others or who commit criminal assault.

I'd like to end with one quote from our throne speech:

"The foundation of a better Ontario and a brighter future for our children is an education system that strives for excellence. In addition to learning new concepts and skills, Ontario's young people also must understand the responsibilities of citizenship, and be able to distinguish right from wrong. Your government will continue to improve Ontario's education system by raising standards, investing in children and promoting principles of respect and responsibility."

Thank you very much for your indulgence.

Hon Dianne Cunningham (Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities): I appreciate this opportunity to speak to you today about the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. As you know, the former Ministry of Education and Training was divided in June of this year and out of that division emerged the new Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

Since the ministry is new, it would be helpful to begin by giving a brief overview of our mandate: to strive to help create and to continuously invest in a post-secondary education and training system of the highest possible quality. We want to ensure that Ontarians in every part of the province continue to have access to the highest-quality education and training and we're committed to giving parents, students, educators, trainers and taxpayers accurate information about how well the system is working.

Allow me to summarize the ministry's key responsibilities. We have two main areas of interest: training and post-secondary education.

In the area of training, the ministry is responsible for developing policy directions for adult education and labour market training; managing and funding provincial programs to support workplace training and workplace preparation, including apprenticeship, career and employment preparation and adult literacy and basic skills; the Ontario summer jobs program; managing provincial relations with the federal government concerning training programs; setting standards and providing certification for occupational training, particularly for trades under the Trades Qualification and Apprenticeship Act, as well as for the soon-to-be-proclaimed new legislation, the Apprenticeship and Certification Act; and undertaking labour market research and planning.

In the area of post-secondary education, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities is responsible for developing policy direction for universities and colleges of applied arts and technology; planning and administering policies related to basic and applied research in this sector; developing policies related to the granting of degrees; distributing funds allocated by the provincial Legislature to colleges and universities; providing financial assistance programs for post-secondary students; and registering private vocational schools.

Earlier this year the Ontario Jobs and Investment Board released a special report entitled A Road Map to Prosperity: An Economic Plan for Jobs in the 21st Century, which my colleague referred to. On one hand, the report acknowledged what we all know: that a highly skilled, well-educated workforce is one of Ontario's key economic advantages. On the other hand, the report articulated challenges that we have an obligation to tackle. Allow me to quote a few lines from the report:

"Employers report skill shortages in a number of sectors, notably information technologies and the automotive industry. As well, adult literacy in Ontario is only in the middle of the pack internationally."

The report went on to note that Ontario employers spend less than their international counterparts on formal employee training. Furthermore, it said that one in four Ontarians between the ages of 15 and 24 have never worked. The report also pointed out that colleges and universities face the added challenge of serving an increased number of students expected to seek admission in the year 2003.

The bottom line is quite simple: We have a first-rate system of colleges and universities and our skilled trades people are highly trained, although we have significant challenges in meeting the need across many sectors. The challenge we have together is to ensure that our systems of training, colleges and universities serve students, the market and our economy even more efficiently in the years to come.

I'd like to describe to you initiatives recently or currently underway in the ministry in training. Let me begin with some of the good news.

Earlier this fall the Ontario government announced that our 1999 Ontario summer jobs program had succeeded beyond all expectations and surpassed the 1998 results. I'm proud that my ministry had the lead government role in coordinating this successful initiative. This year, 61,225 students, the most ever, aged 15 and up received assistance to find work or create their own summer jobs. The Ontario summer jobs campaign is a $50.8-million investment that combines programs offered by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities; Management Board Secretariat; the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade; the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines; and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. Ontario summer jobs is just one of a number of programs aimed at helping Ontarians find jobs and get training that leads to satisfying jobs.

The government's Job Connect program spent $102 million last year to help 102,000 unemployed people, primarily young people no longer attending school, to find jobs, return to school or gain further training. Job Connect is the largest part of the government's $200-million Ontario Youth Opportunities initiative, which includes programs in various ministries.

Last year the Legislature passed the new Apprenticeship and Certification Act, the first comprehensive overhaul of our apprenticeship system since the 1960s. It also happens to be the cornerstone of the government's strategy to streamline and strengthen apprenticeship training. We intend to increase the number of new apprentices entering the system to 19,000 annually from 11,000. When proclaimed, the act will help create a flexible, accountable training system; a strong role for industry, including the recognition that it must drive the training system; greater quality of training and worker mobility; better training standards; and more training opportunities, including expansion into new occupations and trades.

Finally, I should note that the government respects and upholds the established role of apprenticeship training in the construction industry. We have decided that the trades formerly governed by the Trades Qualification and Apprenticeship Act will continue to be governed by that act unless the trade decides otherwise. The ministry will also work with industry committees to clarify the roles that government, the private sector and individual trainers will play in the apprenticeship system.

The ministry will continue to negotiate a fair labour market development agreement with the federal government to achieve a seamless, coordinated, made-in-Ontario employment and training system. Once negotiated, the labour market development agreement will include basic skills upgrading; on-the-job training, including more apprenticeship opportunities; strategic skills; summer jobs for youth; and continued assistance to help students create their own summer jobs.

The federal government has signed a labour market development agreement with every province but Ontario. The Ontario government wants an agreement that will allow this province to create a high-quality set of training and employment programs with a fair share of federally controlled funding from employment insurance premiums. Ottawa has offered 28% of funding for labour market programs. However, Ontarians account for almost 40% of the Canadian labour force and one third of the people unemployed in Canada. As well, Ontarians contribute more than 40% of the country's EI premiums. My question would be, why should the unemployed in Ontario have less access to training opportunities than the unemployed in other provinces? This is a question we've been asking for far too long.

Why would the federal government be satisfied with overlap and duplication of programs that in many instances compete for clients in our own communities who are counting on training programs that are effective and that allow them to re-enter the world of work? The system is inefficient and fractured. Governments should work together. The people want us to do so.

We are working with community colleges to provide alternate delivery formats for classroom training that will meet the needs of our unemployed in isolated communities. For example, Durham College provides training for electricians via the Internet.

We're also working to encourage more women to enter the skilled trades. Over the next three years the ministry will work with the Ontario Women's Directorate to encourage up to 700 women to become apprentices and skilled tradespeople in the automotive industry. The ministry will also work with more than 300 agencies to put in place the renewed literacy and basic skills program to deliver literacy training to more than 55,000 Ontarians this year and many more next year.

Post-secondary education: In the field of post-secondary education, Ontario has one of the world's finest systems of universities and colleges of applied arts and technology. Colleges and universities play a major role in our economic well-being and we take this issue very seriously. Last year, provincial spending on post-secondary education, including operating and capital grants, student support programs and tax credits for students and educational institutions, totalled some $3.5 billion, and this year that figure will grow to more than $4 billion.

As the baby boomers' children age, enrolment will increase at post-secondary institutions. Already first-year university enrolment is up almost 7% over last year, clearly evidence of an accessible system. I want to make absolutely sure that our colleges and universities continue to have places for all willing and qualified students graduating from secondary school. The government's new SuperBuild Growth Fund reflects our commitment to modernizing and expanding Ontario's colleges and universities.

This year alone the SuperBuild fund will invest $742 million to help colleges and universities build and modernize. Of the total amount, $660 million of public funds will go towards new capital projects. Major private sector contributions are also expected. As well, we have announced a $23-million increase in base operating funding to help post-secondary institutions accommodate more students. We are working with colleges and universities to plan for the future.

I also wish to note that we want to help faculties of education address the demand for teachers in certain fields. As a result, the government is providing $3.75 million to add at least 500 new enrolment places to the consecutive teacher education program.

Affordability: Other initiatives are underway to ensure that students will be able to afford post-secondary education. Last fiscal year we spent $535 million through the Ontario student assistance program to help more than 190,000 students with the cost of their education. Average support was more than $7,500 per student.

To meet student needs better and to help limit student debt, federal and provincial student loan programs will be harmonized by August 2000. A recent agreement-very recent-with the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation will give Ontario its fair share of the scholarship funds, with $106 million assisting more than 35,000 students per year.

We are considering ways to introduce, by next fall, Aiming for the Top tuition scholarships for Ontario's top high school graduates in need of financial assistance. When fully implemented, we expect that 10,000 students will receive these scholarships each year.

The Ontario student opportunity grants program will provide an estimated $300 million in grants to limit students' repayable debt.

We are also requiring universities and colleges to do their part to ensure that financial aid is available to students in need. As a result, universities and colleges will provide $126 million directly to students this year by setting aside 30% of tuition fee increases.

We have worked with the colleges and universities to set up Ontario student opportunity trust funds at each institution. As a result, and with contributions from the private sector, nearly $600 million in permanent endowments will provide additional funding for student assistance. These funds will provide assistance for up to 185,000 students over a 10-year period.

Students have asked us to consider allowing them to earn more than the current $600 per academic year while they are studying before their eligibility for OSAP is affected, and we are looking at how this might be achieved.

Quality and relevance: In the spirit of greater accountability, which is visible now in all facets of the government's activities, we last year introduced key performance indicators to measure how well colleges and universities are turning out graduates with skills needed in the marketplace. These key performance indicators measure rates of employment and satisfaction on the part of graduates, employers and students. Recently published results for colleges reported that 89% of college graduates were employed within six months of graduation and that 80% of employers surveyed were satisfied with the preparation that college graduates had received. Ultimately, we will be using such results to determine how we will distribute up to 10% of the provincial colleges operating budget.

We are responding to Ontario's shortage of skilled, high-technology workers through the access to opportunities program. It will provide $228 million over three years to double the number of students who enrol in computer science and high-demand engineering programs at universities. Enrolment in related community college programs and eligible university graduate programs will also increase by 50%. We expect to fund about 23,000 new spaces in these programs.

In closing, I want to report that the ministry is working hard to develop timely, innovative partnerships with educational institutions and the private sector to ensure that we focus our resources as productively and efficiently as possible. We have a great deal at stake, no less indeed than our long-term economic competitiveness and our ability to generate sustaining and satisfying employment for years to come.