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| Ontario | 37e | 2e | Discours sur l’éducation | 19 juin 2001 | Janet Ecker | Minister of Education | Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario |

Mr Chair and committee members, I welcome the opportunity to appear once again before the standing committee on estimates.

Last September, I provided committee members with an update on what the Ministry of Education had accomplished in our efforts to improve our publicly funded education system in the province. With another school year drawing to a close, I am pleased to bring you an update on all our activities.

But I think it's important to reaffirm, off the top, that our goal for education reform is the same today as it was when we were first elected in 1995. We remain committed to ensuring that Ontario's education system provides students with the best education in Canada and that we can equip our students with the skills they will need to succeed in a challenging world. Our focus on higher student achievement remains undiminished.

To meet our goals, we've laid out a comprehensive plan for education reform that's guided our steps since that 1995 election. Since then, we've been working our way through our commitments and doing what we said we would do.

We committed to fair and equitable funding for all students in Ontario's publicly funded schools, regardless of where they live. To fulfill that commitment, we introduced a new, student-focused approach to funding to protect classroom spending, reduce bureaucratic waste and guarantee our students that the resources for their education would not have to depend on whether they lived in a rich or a poor neighbourhood. This new funding approach replaced a complex system of 34 different kinds of grants with a more streamlined, transparent and equitable series of 11 grants.

One of the most significant of these changes is in the way we fund capital expenditures. I know that's something that has created confusion sometimes, but with our funding, boards know that funding will be based on long-term enrolment forecasts, so they can plan more effectively to meet their capital needs.

I'm pleased to note that by this fall, 246 new schools and additions, accommodating over 106,000 students, will have been constructed since the new funding approach was introduced in 1998. It's also interesting to note that since this change, there has been a 10% decline in the number of portables in our schools, another significant improvement.

In 1995, we also made a commitment to introduce a demanding new curriculum that focused on core subjects like math and science and provided our students with better preparation for post-secondary or workplace destinations. With the release last year of the new grades 11 and 12 curriculums, the government has completed the most comprehensive modernization and overhaul of the kindergarten to grade 12 curriculum that has ever taken place. This coming fall, the new grade 11 curriculum, with its innovative destination-based courses, will begin to be taught across Ontario, and the new grade 12 curriculum will be taught for the first time the following year.

In 1995, we committed to providing standardized province-wide student testing, so that parents could have clearer information about how well their children were learning and where they needed extra help. The Education Quality and Accountability Office's province-wide tests for grades 3, 6 and 9 and for grade 10 literacy testing are now a well-established part of our educational system.

Standardized tests give parents, students and educators vital information about where students are making progress and where improvement is needed. For example, these tests have shown that our grade 3 students are struggling to meet the provincial standard for reading and writing, something we suspected but had not had the data to prove. That is why earlier this month I announced a new early reading strategy. Supported by $24 million in new funding, it requires every elementary school to set targets to improve the reading achievement of junior kindergarten to grade 3 students, as measured by the province-wide grade 3 test, and to report annually to parents on the school's progress.

Principals, school councils and teachers will have key roles in setting targets and putting improvement plans into action. Teams of improvement specialists will assist selected schools that the ministry and boards have identified as needing extra help in order to improve. These teams will help the schools identify problem areas and help them develop plans to help their students succeed.

There's also evidence that our rigorous new curriculum and standardized testing program are paying off. In the fall last year, we received encouraging news with the results of the 1999 Third International Math and Science Study, called TIMSS, in which a sample of Ontario's grade 8 students participated. The results showed that Ontario students have significantly improved in math and science when compared with Ontario's 1995 results. In the coming months, we will also begin expanding student testing to other grades and other subjects. We will require that schools provide those who are falling behind with the extra support they need to catch up.

In the 1999 election, we laid out the next phase of our education reform plan. We did that in our campaign document entitled Blueprint. Some of the things included in there were to ensure that classroom funding continues to grow beyond enrolment; to establish a new province-wide code of conduct, which is designed to help create safe, more respectful learning environments for students to learn in and for teachers to teach in; new school council regulations to give parents the stronger voice they've asked for in their children's education; a comprehensive teacher testing program to ensure that all our teachers have and continue to improve their skills and knowledge to help our students achieve; and measures to ensure greater school board accountability.

There's certainly a great deal of work left to do. The ministry, though, has made progress, I believe, in each of these critical areas. I'd just like to briefly summarize some of the important steps, because I think they bear repeating.

First, to talk about funding, as part of our ongoing commitment to support the publicly funded education system, the province continues to increase its investment, to increase funding for our system. For the upcoming school year, funding for education has been boosted by more than $360 million. And in response to what we heard from our education partners, this new funding is going out in a way that gives boards greater flexibility to address what they determine to be their local priorities.

I think it's important to get on the record that the province has indeed increased the amount of money it is spending on public education. When we came to office in 1995, education spending was $12.9 billion. With the additional $360 million for the next school year, as I just mentioned, education spending will have increased to $13.8 billion, a growth well above the growth of enrolment.

As well, I think it's important to recognize that we continue to improve and enhance funding each year to deal with priority areas. For example, this year, because of changes we made, boards with additional costs as a result of having remote and rural locations will see increased funding of $37 million -- and there were some 10 additional school boards that received remote and rural funding. As I came in today, I was just reading a press clipping that one of those particular boards is actually in surplus this year because of that. I think that is another important step that year by year we improve and enhance how we fund so that there is not only more money out there dollar for dollar but also more in priority areas

Of course, one of the key priority areas has been to ensure that more of that funding goes into the classroom and not into administration. I'm pleased to note that since 1997 -- this was when we changed our approach to funding -- classroom spending has increased from 61% to 64% of a school board's total operating budget. We estimate that spending on school board administration has also declined by $150 million since 1995. So not only do we have more dollars, but we have more dollars in the classroom -- approximately $800 million more overall in classroom priorities.

At the same time, we continue to focus resources on other priority areas, for example, special education. Last year, we increased spending by 12% over the previous year, and that was the third year in a row that resources in this area have been increased. For the upcoming school year, funding for special ed will increase again to a projected $1.37 billion.

In addition, though -- because while resources are very much part it, they're not the only issue that needs to be addressed -- as part of our ongoing plan with special education to improve quality and accountability, we created new standards for individual education plans for our special-needs students. This will help to ensure that boards are accountable for delivering high-quality programs and services and also that parents will know what services their child should be receiving. We've also provided and worked with our partners to develop standards for school boards' special education plans -- the overall services they provide for special education.

We're now working on the development of quality standards for each exceptionality, if you will -- for example, for children with autism -- so each school board will know and be very clear on the kinds of services, the range of services, they need to provide to a child with autism to help support their education. As well, in this year's budget we announced an additional $3 million this year and $4 million in future years to expand education supports for children and youth in institutions and facilities.

Another important initiative I mentioned was the code of conduct and our Safe Schools Act. We've already introduced significant measures to help make our schools safer, more respectful places that will support learning and teaching. Last spring we introduced the Ontario schools code of conduct, which sets out clear provincial standards of behaviour for everyone involved in our schools and, as well, outlines the consequences for students who are breaking those rules, who do not observe those rules.

We passed the Safe Schools Act last spring. That provides the legal authority to enforce the code of conduct. As with our other reforms, a phased-in approach is being used to recognize the linkages between the various elements of the safe schools initiative. Once different sections of the Safe Schools Act that set out mandatory expulsions come into effect for the next school year, principals, under this new authority, will have the authority to expel students from their schools for up to one year for serious infractions that are set out in the legislation. In addition, teachers will be able to issue one-day suspensions for a number of infractions. Since April, school and school board staff have been receiving training to support their new roles and responsibilities under this legislation.

Under the new expulsion of a pupil regulation, students who are fully expelled can earn their way back into a regular classroom by successfully completing a strict-discipline or equivalent program. We have seven demonstration projects that are now being put together for fully expelled students. They'll be up and running for this next school year. I think this is a very important improvement over previous circumstances where, if a student was expelled, the school board could quite literally wash their hands of that young person. What this requires is that if a young person wants to earn their way back into a classroom, a school board must be able to have the programming in place to help that young person not only continue their education but also deal with whatever issues may well have caused their behaviour. I should also point out that this initiative is accompanied by $16 million in new funding to help support it.

Safety and protection of children in our schools is obviously an important priority. While the Safe Schools Act has made great progress on this front, I certainly recognize there is more we need do to help our students make our schools safer places to learn in. We are currently in the process of implementing a number of key recommendations from Justice Sydney Robins's report on sexual abuse and misconduct in schools. He had a number of extensive and very careful recommendations which we have been working with our partners to put in place.

For example, last December we released a provincial model for local police-school board protocols, which directly addresses a number of his recommendations such as having appropriate procedures between school boards, police and children's aid societies for addressing sexual abuse cases or when there is a suspicion that such activity is going on, and also clear procedures and rules on how and when students can be interviewed by police, and how and when parents will be contacted if there's an incident that involves their child that might well require police involvement -- again, some important improvements not only for safety but also to make sure the rights of parents and all students are being observed appropriately.

I had a meeting with all our school board representatives to discuss the recommendations directed to them to make sure all of us, as partners, were working toward implementing them. Each board will be bringing their employment policies and practices in line with the recommendations. We've requested that they provide us with an update on their individual procedures and practices and how well they're doing on this so we can ensure we are indeed meeting the challenge.

I think it is important to note that we have also included age-appropriate training on sexual misconduct in the new curriculum for children, so they understand about setting personal boundaries and knowing when things are not appropriate. I am also pleased that the College of Teachers has responded well to the report and moved forward with a number of initiatives in their area. For example, based on Robins's recommendations, they've made some recommendations to the government about how to move forward with legislative and regulatory changes that would give them greater authority to deal appropriately with sexual misconduct by teachers and also to better define and broaden the definition of this behaviour, so we can prevent this happening to any child.

I think there's another important partner in our education system, and that is parents. Research has clearly shown that greater parental involvement in education not only supports improved student achievement but also encourages and then supports schools and school boards to be more directly accountable to parents. In 2000-01, we continued our support of parental involvement in the school system through an important new regulation that was based on what parents told us they wanted done. It strengthens their advisory role as parents on school councils and gives them more influence over their children's education.

Under this regulation, school councils have the right to make recommendations to their schools and school boards on any matter including, for example, but not limited to, the selection process for principals and vice-principals and the implementation of their local code of conduct safe schools policy. All school boards and principals will not only be required to seek the advice of parents on school councils but also, and equally important, to report back to parents about how this advice has been taken and what happened to it -- again, one of the things many parents expressed frustration about.

In addition to giving school councils a stronger provincial voice, the government restructured the Ontario Parent Council which, as some of you may know, is an independent group that provides advice to the government on issues of education policy as they pertain to parents. We've restructured the council so that school councils can now nominate and have regional representation on the council. This was something we did over the course of the winter at regional meetings where they selected their regional representatives to be on the council. That is now in place. They've had their beginning meetings, and I think they're going to be extremely helpful in their role.

The coming school year will see another significant initiative to support parental involvement. Starting in November, we will be launching annual surveys to measure parent satisfaction with the education system, with the education their child is receiving.

There's another important partner in our education system, and that has to do with our excellent teachers. I want to talk about another significant initiative which will help improve student achievement and help promote and support excellence in our teaching profession. It is probably a bit of a cliché, but I think it is worth repeating, that excellence in learning starts with excellence in teaching. Here in Ontario we have many excellent and dedicated teachers who have the skills, who have the knowledge and who go above and beyond for students on a regular basis, because they see that as just part of the job. They have the skills and the knowledge to help students achieve higher standards.

We also know there are other teachers who require assistance in doing so. We also know that parents have been very clear that they want to make sure teacher training and teacher learning is as consistent, as effective and as rigorous as it needs to be. We are responding to those concerns through implementing our comprehensive Ontario teacher testing program. In May last year, after extensive consultation and research, we laid out the policy framework and the implementation schedule for this initiative. The first component of the program was put in place last fall, and that dealt with a language proficiency test for teachers who were trained outside Ontario in a language other than English or French.

Last week, I introduced the Stability and Excellence in Education Act to move forward with another piece of this legislation. If approved by the Legislature, the act would require teachers to participate in a recertification program. This proposed program would require all teachers to successfully complete certain courses and professional development activities over a five-year cycle throughout their careers in order to be recertified. This new approach to a rigorous, more high-quality system of professional development will help to ensure that all of our teachers stay up to date and have the skills and knowledge to help students achieve the higher standards we have set for them. I should say that the recommendation for recertification was something that was first put forward by the Royal Commission on Learning back in 1995, a report that had considerable support from all three parties in terms of the recommendations that it put forward.

The government's comprehensive program for ensuring teacher excellence will also encompass a number of other initiatives. These include a qualifying test, much like a lawyer's bar exam, that will begin next spring. This will be a test that all graduating teachers will be taking before they step into a classroom to ensure that they have what they need from the faculties of education.

We'll also have an internship program to help new teachers develop good classroom management and teaching skills, through coaching and support from more experienced colleagues. Again, some boards have been very good at developing programs of this kind, but we want to make sure that every new teacher who steps into an Ontario classroom can have this kind of support at every board.

We'll also this fall be bringing forward a province-wide performance appraisal system that will ensure that both principals and school boards in their role as employers are evaluating all teachers in a consistent, fair and accurate way in the classroom across the province. That evaluation in the classroom is also a very important ability to ensure that we're meeting the needs of our students. The other thing about the performance appraisal and evaluation system is that it will also allow parents and students to have a voice in this process as well; again another significant improvement.

Other initiatives: recognition for teaching excellence. As we announced in the April 2001 throne speech, we will be encouraging school boards to reward high-performing teachers and principals. In addition, we are working with the college of teachers, the teachers' federation and the faculties of education to meet Ontario's growing demand for new teachers to be able to recruit the best candidates to our teaching profession here in Ontario. While we have been, when compared to other provinces, more successful in attracting teachers to Ontario, to our classrooms in this province, we know with the worldwide shortage that everyone is confronting we will need to be much more assertive about making sure that we can have good, excellent people standing in our classrooms.

One of the other initiatives I want to touch on is that for the upcoming school year we have committed to a number of additional initiatives to support our students, teachers and parents in this coming school year, and this has to do with the issue of extracurricular activities. In May of this year I announced a significant package of initiatives to help our boards take steps to help all of the partners to ensure that students have these opportunities available for them.

The package included additional resources that we put forward at that time, $50 million in funding that school boards could use to address local priorities. It also would allow school boards to vary the average class size in high schools by up to one student so they could use those resources to improve access to teachers and help students, providing greater access to remedial help by expanding what is included in the definition of instructional time.

These initiatives were based on key recommendations from the advisory group on co-instructional activities. After considerable consultation and work, they brought forward a number of recommendations to, for example, broaden the definition of instructional time to give school boards greater flexibility to recognize co-instructional activities when assigning teachers' workload. This is something that the legislation before the House this session proposes to do. They recommended developing province-wide standards for the training and orientation of community volunteers to help with co-instructional activities, work that we are doing with our educational partners. They've also recommended that we work with the college of teachers and the faculties of education to provide courses to prepare teachers for leadership roles in co-instructional activities; again, work that we have underway. They've also recommended that we withdraw the sections of the Education Accountability Act that would have required teachers to provide co-instructional activities, while at the same time proclaiming other sections of the act which would require school boards to develop and implement plans for the provision of co-instructional activities for high schools. This is something that is included in the legislation that is before the House this session.

If passed, the Stability and Excellence in Education Act would enable us to move forward with these commitments.

While I'm mentioning that act, there is another initiative that I think I'd like to mention, and that is that the act, if passed, will enable us make some important changes in the collective bargaining process. We recognize that if our students are to benefit from changes like the new curriculum they need to be able to learn in a more stable learning environment. Some of the annual rounds of collective agreements that we've seen in some boards have certainly been a concern to parents. While some boards and unions have been able to come to responsible agreements, other boards have had significant difficulty, both with teachers and school support staff. So both parents and students have expressed concerns about these disruptions.

In the legislation we propose two steps to help bring greater labour stability to our schools. The first includes adjustments to the collective bargaining process that would require the upcoming collective agreements negotiated between boards and teachers' unions to run for three years. This requirement will be phased in. As current contracts expire, school boards and teachers' unions will be negotiating contracts to expire on August 31, 2004. All subsequent collective agreements would have a term of three years. So it allows us to respect the collective bargaining process but at the same time lead to a little bit more stability in this area.

The other important change is that the legislation proposes to extend the mandate of the Education Relations Commission to advise when a student's school year is in jeopardy when the strike or the dispute involves school board support staff. Of course, that was something that they could not do. They could only advise us in disputes between school boards and teachers' unions.

Our achievements in education reform we believe have established a solid foundation for a school system that is focused on more accountability, more quality and improved student achievement. We intend to take further steps to build on this foundation, as we promised we would. By promoting higher standards, improved accountability, greater flexibility and choice, we will create a public education system that will continuously strive for excellence in student achievement.