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| Ontario | 37e | 3e | Discours sur l’éducation | 24 septembre 2002 | Elizabeth Witmer | Minister of Education | Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario |

I am extremely pleased to appear before the committee on behalf of the Ministry of Education. Joining me here is the ministry's deputy minister, Suzanne Herbert.

First and foremost let me say how proud and pleased I am to have been appointed Ontario's Minister of Education and to be able to continue the work that has been undertaken by my colleague Janet Ecker in this very important portfolio. I say "important" because I think one of the most important purposes and responsibilities of any government is the growth and personal development of our young people. In a world in which rapid change and continuous learning are a way of life, our schools and our dedicated teachers are assisting students of all ages to adapt to challenging times and also encouraging them, of course, to pursue new interests.

There was a man at one time whose name was Lon Watters, who said that schools are buildings "with four walls -- with tomorrow inside." However, it is by working together as a team, whether students, parents, government, taxpayers and staff, and by maintaining an optimism for what lies ahead that we are going to effectively be able to meet the challenges of the future of these young people and make sure that the tomorrows are even brighter for all of the students we serve.

I think we have a great opportunity and a great responsibility to ensure that we can provide the best learning environment in the province in order that each student can achieve their maximum potential.

I would just be on the record as saying I am a strong advocate of public education. I believe we have an outstanding system, and by working together we can all continue to make it even better.

As of this September, I'm pleased to say that the province-wide standardized curriculum is now in place for every grade. Our last class of OAC students will graduate at the end of this school year. These are probably the most obvious examples of an education system that has changed fundamentally over the past seven years.

When our government was elected in 1995, we made a commitment to the people of this province to reform and improve Ontario's education system. We promised that we would make it equitable for all students, no matter where they lived or which board they attended. We also committed to make it responsive to student needs and more accountable to the parents and taxpayers. We have kept this promise. However, we know there is more that needs to be done.

We have put in place a comprehensive plan in order that we can improve student learning and achievement and support our teachers. I'd just like to review some of the key elements of the reform. We have established a new curriculum from kindergarten to the end of high school that sets a high standard for student achievement and excellence. We have introduced province-wide tests that are reporting regularly on how successfully students and our schools are performing. Third, we have developed strategies that respond to the test results, such as the early reading strategy and the early math strategy, to help our students gain the fundamentals they are going to need for future success. Fourth, we have put in place a comprehensive program for teachers' ongoing professional development and an appraisal system to ensure they have the most up-to-date skills and knowledge and are able to apply these effectively in the classroom.

I am extremely pleased to say that as a result of the plan and the reforms that have been introduced, student achievement is improving. It is essential that we continue to build on these steps, and we will continue to do so with the support and co-operation of others in the field of education.

In the area of funding, within two days of being sworn in Premier Eves demonstrated that education is a clear priority for the government. He announced that $65 million more would be given to school boards for new textbooks and technology-based learning materials. Two weeks after that, we announced that $25 million would go toward expanding the early reading strategy and introducing a new early math strategy. Two weeks after that, we announced that we would increase funding for Ontario's schools by $350 million for the upcoming school year. Then, in the provincial budget in June, we built further on our educational investment and announced another $117 million in new funding for Ontario schools.

I am pleased to say that since April our government has announced almost $560 million in new spending to support our students and our staff in school boards throughout Ontario. This year, we will be spending a record $14.26 billion on publicly funded education. That is a 2.9% increase over 2001-02. Almost all school boards will receive more money, even though about half of them will have fewer students, because that is one of the dilemmas we are facing: a declining population in future years.

This significant increase means our schools will have access to more of the resources and tools they need to provide a quality education to students. It means that Ontario students will benefit from greater learning opportunities. However, we know that the funding formula that we introduced four years ago needs to be reviewed, and we are undertaking a review to make sure that we are still achieving equality and fairness to the students throughout the province.

But let me just talk about the funding formula. It's based on a foundation grant that covers the basic cost of providing an educational program to a student for one year. Additional funds are provided through 10 specia- purpose grants. The purpose of student-focused funding is to ensure quality education and equality of opportunity for all students, no matter where they live in this great province. The funding formula has succeeded in guaranteeing that every child has the same chance to achieve his or her maximum potential and to leave with the skills and knowledge they need.

While the funding formula has accomplished a great deal, Ontarians have told us they do want improvements where possible. Our government has listened to these concerns and we have responded. In the throne speech, we announced that Dr Mordechai Rozanski, president of the University of Guelph -- and a strong advocate, I might add, of public education -- would lead the Education Equality Task Force in a review of the funding formula. The task force has been asked to make recommendations on ways to build on the success of the student-focused funding formula and improve fairness, stability and certainty for schools and students and obviously take a look at the issue of adequacy.

Dr Rozanski has been carrying out his review in several stages, and he has been gathering input through stakeholder meetings, public consultations and submissions on the best way to fund school boards. He began by examining past studies and reports on education funding and researching best practices in other parts of Canada and the world. Then, in August and early September, the task force met with more than 180 representatives of education stakeholder groups in 12 day-long round-table discussions. Now, during September, the task force is hosting 10 days of public meetings in Barrie, London, North Bay, Ottawa, Thunder Bay and Toronto. In addition, the task force has been receiving submissions by mail and through its Web site. And with the public meetings now wrapping up, Dr Rozanski will be preparing his report and recommendations. The task force, I'm pleased to say, is on track to present its recommendations in early November, and, as we had always indicated would happen, they will be considered for implementation in the 2003-04 school year.

Let's talk now about the issue of balanced budgets. It is worth noting that the requirement for individual school boards to balance their budgets has been part of education since 1933. Unfortunately, despite the fact that our government has put more money into the system this year and listened to the concerns about the funding formula, three of Ontario's 72 boards did not live up to their financial and legal obligations this year. We have acted to bring stability to the education of children in these communities by sending in an investigator to review each board's finances and to assist the board in meeting its financial obligations to ensure that schools would open in September for students and that there would be stability in the system.

Since the boards were unable to balance their budgets, we have appointed supervisors to prepare and work with stakeholders to implement a plan to return each board to a balanced financial position and to ensure that parents and students would see stability in the schools.

I just want to add here as an aside that the appointment of a supervisor is always a difficult decision. I think it's important to know that that decision was only made after our ministry had extended the deadlines to board trustees several times and made every effort to resolve the matters by other means.

Looking now at the issue of school renewal, another important objective we need to be addressing, and have been, is to provide our students with effective, safe accommodation. Ontario school boards own and operate more than 5,000 schools, with some 250 million square feet of floor space. The total value of these facilities is more than $25 billion.

Our funding formula includes the pupil accommodation grant. This annual grant gives school boards both the resources and the flexibility to operate, maintain and upgrade existing schools and to build new schools where they are needed. In May this year I announced that the grant for school renewal would be $241 million for 2002-03. In the budget, an additional $25 million was added, for a total of $266 million.

We also committed $6.5 million toward replacing -- in other words, rebuilding -- nine schools that were identified as having unfeasible repair costs.

Since our new approach to funding pupil accommodation includes financing construction costs over long periods of time, these dollars will support new construction valued at $65 million.

I'm also pleased to say that a further $17 million will be invested over two years to assess school renewal needs across the province and to identify the most pressing investment priorities.

We understand that we must renew and maintain our schools, not just because we need to protect an important public asset, but we must ensure that our students have a safe and healthy learning environment.

I'd like to turn now to curriculum. We all know the importance of ensuring that our young people gain the knowledge and learn the skills they need to succeed.

In today's competitive world, we have a responsibility to prepare students for the challenges of the future by setting high standards of achievement, but also by supporting them in achieving those standards. Parents across Ontario told us they wanted a more rigorous curriculum with specific, clear and consistent standards province-wide. Again we have responded.

From the new kindergarten program, through the elementary grades and to the new high school program, the new curriculum focuses on the basics of reading, writing, math and science and on helping students acquire knowledge and skills.

We have been supporting the new curriculum in many ways. Since 1999 we have dedicated $289 million to new textbooks and related learning materials. By the end of the four-year implementation of the new high school program in 2003, we will have allocated $70 million to support teacher training for the new elementary and secondary programs, and over the same period we will have dedicated another $80 million to provide other professional supports and resources.

I am pleased to say that the new curriculum has met with considerable success. Provincial, national and international results show that our students' knowledge and skills are improving. However, having said that, we are also aware that some students will need extra assistance and support to master the higher standards of the new curriculum, and we are committed and we will help them.

For 2002-03, student-focused funding will flow a projected $496.1 million to boards to help these students, including $293.4 million through the learning opportunities grant, which includes $25 million for grades 7 to 10 literacy and math programs; $168.5 million through the language grant for English as a second language; $15.8 million through the language grant for French-language students; and $18.4 million through the continuing education and other programs grant for programs such as summer school.

A number of education stakeholders have expressed concerns that the new high school curriculum for applied courses may be too challenging for some of our students. I assure you, our government is fully committed to working with our stakeholders to ensure that the students who need support will receive the support they need. We are working with our education partners to address these issues. We want to ensure that students obtain the skills they will need whether they go directly into the world of work, apprenticeships or post-secondary education.

Test results: I mentioned a month ago that test results show that Ontario's students are responding positively to our new curriculum. I want to elaborate on this point because I've had the opportunity now to meet with many educational leaders from around the world who have identified the fact that our students are doing well and have come to ask us, "What's the secret?"

Regular assessment of progress in learning the curriculum is a key part of the government's plan to improve student achievement. We all need to know if the education system is providing the consistency and quality we want for our children. Our students are now regularly assessed in reading, writing and math in grades 3 and 6 and in math in grade 9, and during the last school year the grade 10 literacy test was administered for the first time as a requirement for high school graduation. The results of provincial, national and international tests all continue to provide evidence that our students' knowledge and skills are improving.

I would just like to give you some examples of how our students continue to meet the challenges we have placed before them. I also want to add that this would not be possible without the support of the hard-working teachers and the parents throughout Ontario.

Ontario English-language grade 3 students reaching the provincial standard in math increased from 43% in 1998 to 61% in 2001, while French-language grade 6 students meeting the provincial standard in math rose from 55% in 1999 to 60% in 2001.

The national school achievement indicators program found that Ontario English-language 13-year-olds improved their ranking in mathematical content in four years, since 1997, from 15th to 4th of 18 ranked jurisdictions. In 2001, they were behind only Alberta and Quebec. Ontario's French-language 13-year-olds improved their ranking in mathematical problem solving from 15th to 5th of 18 ranked jurisdictional groups.

Ontario's 15-year-olds also performed well in the program for international student assessment in 2000, which found that Canadian students ranked near the top among 32 countries for achievement in reading, mathematics and science. In fact, I would add that Finland was the only country that achieved a higher level on the key reading component of the test than our Ontario students, and in both math and science, Ontario students' scores were significantly higher than those of students in the United States and Germany.

Students, teachers and parents are all to be congratulated for these most significant achievements. We need to continue to ensure that we provide the opportunity for our students to meet the high standards of learning. These results make it clear that we are succeeding with an education agenda that focuses on students first and on learning.

Let's take a look now at early reading and early math, because we know that these activities are the foundation of a strong education. In order to help students master these basic skills early, we have undertaken some initiatives. We have undertaken province-wide tests, and we are doing this because they are a valuable tool for determining where there are problems and how we can best help students. Successful strategies for improving student performance require three key elements: measurable targets for better student learning, tools for school improvement and, of course, we need the financial and human resources to meet these goals.

Last year we learned that only 49% of grade 3 students were achieving the provincial standard in reading. We needed to respond. How could we help these children? We responded by launching the early reading program to improve the reading skills of children from junior kindergarten to grade 3. To support this strategy the government invested $29 million.

We also know that schools can't do it alone. We know that if students are going to improve their reading skills, it is important that families read to their children at a very early age in life and continue to support their children with reading activities. In May our government announced we would invest $25 million to expand the early reading program beyond grade 3 to grade 6.

We also established a new early math strategy to help raise the level of math achievement of students from JK to grade 3. In the budget, our government announced a further investment of $5 million to extend the early math strategy to the grade 6 level and to support our teachers and enhance the teaching skills of elementary school teachers in this area.

Both of these strategies require school boards to set measurable targets for improving student achievement. This funding will support improved teaching strategies, new learning resources and special assistance for schools whose students need extra help in achieving their goals. Schools are also required to report annually on their test results and on how well they have succeeded in meeting their individual targets.

Our government is also moving into phase two of the support for schools that need extra help program. This is one component of the early reading strategy that provides additional support to a selected number of schools to improve the reading performance of grade 3 students.

I would like to highlight the fact that in the fall of 2001, 16 schools were selected by a steering committee, with input from local school boards, to participate in phase one of the program whereby we would support schools that need extra help. This fall we will be announcing an additional 14 schools that have been selected for phase two.

To further support improved student learning, the June budget announced the creation of the student achievement fund. The budget stated that $20 million will be provided to elementary schools. There will be $5,000 allocated to every elementary school to address student literacy. The principal, in consultation with the school council, will be able to invest in local initiatives that further improve student learning. This program is just one more way in which our government is working with our education partners toward school excellence and higher student achievement.

Let me turn now to special education. Students with special needs are an important priority of this government. We must and we want to foster an education system that has the flexibility to meet individual special needs and that is also focused on achieving the best outcomes for all students across the province.

Funding for special education has increased by over 17% since 1998-99 to more than $1.37 billion in the 2002-03 fiscal year.

We are also continuing to implement our multi-year plan to improve accountability and quality standards in special education.

Currently, we are undertaking a comprehensive review of the intensive support amount files to ensure that funding accurately reflects each board's share of high-needs students.

We also plan to expedite and streamline the assessment process and to ensure that the financial support and human resources are there to support these students with special needs.

In the budget, we took action -- again in response to what we were hearing -- to help boards complete the assessments they need to do as part of the ISA review. Indeed our government announced one-time assistance of $10 million to help clear the waiting lists for professional assessment of high-needs students. This additional funding will be of particular help to rural, northern and French boards, which report that assessments tend to be more costly in their communities. Of course, at times they also don't have the human resources to do some of the assessment.

In this fiscal year, our government will also allocate $10 million in capital funding to upgrade the provincial schools for children with disabilities. I was pleased last Friday to participate in a groundbreaking at the school in Brantford.

I want to talk about teaching excellence, because I want to highlight the fact that we have outstanding, dedicated and excellent teachers who work in this province tirelessly. We need to also remember the important role that teachers play in the lives of our students, and we want to ensure that they can do the best that they possibly can. So in 2002-03 we are providing $10 million in one-time funding to develop further professional learning resources for teachers and principals. We also want to move forward to put in place a comprehensive approach to supporting teacher excellence.

Transportation: we transport 800,000 children every day. Our government is increasing the transportation grant in order that we can ensure that our students get to school safely, on time and ready to learn.

We've also introduced safe schools initiatives, the code of conduct, and of course, at the beginning of the last school year, we made some changes to the Education Act in that regard. We recently passed the Student Protection Act to help protect students from sexual abuse. Of course, we want to make sure that parents have a strong voice and an important role in their children's education system.

I want to conclude by saying that our government is fully committed to a strong public school system in Ontario, one that supports achievement, improvement and excellence in education. We want to make sure that we work with our stakeholders in order that we can support our young people in achieving their maximum potential. Thank you.