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| Ontario | 37e | 4e | Discours sur l’éducation | 10 juin 2003 | Elizabeth Witmer | Minister of Education | Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario |

Thank you very much, Mr Chair and committee members. I'm very pleased to be here today on behalf of the Ministry of Education. Joining me for the committee proceedings is the deputy minister, Suzanne Herbert.

Since I last had the pleasure of addressing this committee, our government has continued to build upon and strengthen the public education system in the province of Ontario. I would just hasten to add that I believe we have a very strong system in this province and we need to continue, certainly, to build upon it. This is the priority. Our government is fully committed to excellence in education. We want every child in Ontario, no matter where they live, to have the opportunity to gain the skills and knowledge that he or she needs to reach their full potential and to achieve personal success. We want every child in Ontario to have equal access to learning and opportunities. We want to set every child on the path to becoming a self-confident and contributing adult who will help enhance Ontario's prosperity and competitiveness in the years to come.

The parents and taxpayers of this province, as well as our dedicated, hard-working teachers, administrators, school boards and trustees, also share this commitment to our young people, to help them achieve success. This past year and in the years before that, we have all worked together on a long and sometimes bumpy road to implement a far-reaching set of public education reforms aimed at continually improving student learning.

Since 1995, our government has introduced reform based on providing Ontario's elementary and secondary school students with a quality education characterized by high standards, clearly stated expectations and frequent, straightforward evaluation. We have moved forward in four fundamental areas: (1) promoting a safe and stable learning environment; (2) developing and sustaining a high-quality, relevant province-wide curriculum; (3) ensuring excellence in teaching; and (4) supporting a transparent and accountable education system. It has not always been easy. There have been many issues and there have been challenges. But at the end of the day I am pleased to say there have also been many, many successes and achievements which have helped our students on the road to success.

I'd like to begin with the Education Equality Task Force report. When I addressed this committee, Dr Mordechai Rozanski, as chair of the Education Equality Task Force, was in the midst of reviewing the student-focused funding formula implemented in 1998. The purpose of student-focused funding is to ensure quality education and equality of opportunity for all students, no matter where they live in the province. As part of his review, Dr Rozanski examined past studies and reports on education funding and researched best practices. He met with education stakeholder groups, conducted public meetings and accepted submissions by mail and through the Web site. We were fortunate to receive his final report last December.

I want to take this opportunity one more time to publicly thank Dr Rozanski for his hard work and to also acknowledge and express my appreciation to the groups and individuals who contributed their thoughts and their suggestions to Dr Rozanski. The report confirmed that our education funding reforms are sound; it validated the funding formula. It also provided the government with immediate and long-term recommendations on how we could build on the strengths of the student-focused funding formula.

Our government considers the Rozanski report an excellent blueprint for the future. We are, as Dr Rozanski recommended, implementing the report over three years. I'm very pleased to say we've been able to move forward on several of the recommendations; in fact, several of them we moved forward on immediately. Within three days of receiving the report, our government committed $610 million in new funding to special education, teacher salaries and student transportation. We announced $250 million for teachers, education assistants and other specialists for students with special needs. We announced $340 million to give school boards the flexibility to reach fair and responsible collective agreements with their teachers and staff for the 2002-03 school year in order that we would have stability in the classroom. We announced the board-by-board allocation of $20 million to enhance the safety and efficiency of the student transportation system.

Our government responded to other Rozanski recommendations in subsequent weeks. We announced that $66 million more over three years would be invested in computers for the classroom, up-to-date textbooks and other learning materials. We do believe that students need resources, like textbooks, computers and other classroom supplies, which will enable them to reach their full potential.

I'm also pleased to say that we announced the $50-million GOALS strategy to benefit students who need extra help in reading, writing and math, and in their transition to the workplace or to college or university. We also announced that $75 million more would go toward renovating and replacing existing schools. At the same time, we announced $74 million to help small rural and northern schools and to address the issue of declining enrolment. Some $50 million from that total is going to be used to develop a new rural education strategy. Dr James Downey, the former president of the University of Waterloo, has been appointed to provide the government with recommendations on the development of the $50-million strategy to help small rural and northern schools. We look forward to receiving his recommendations at the end of this month so that action can be taken before the start of the next school year. Dr Downey has met with stakeholders from across rural and northern Ontario to help him formulate his recommendations. Our government is committed to ensuring that all students have equal access to a quality education across the province. Dr Downey's report will help us ensure that students in small rural and northern schools are provided with the best educational opportunities possible.

By the time the Ontario budget was presented on March 27, our government had committed $875 million toward Ontario's public education system based on the recommendations of Dr Rozanski.

The budget itself responded to another central recommendation. Our multi-year funding approach commits the government to an increase of almost $2 billion in the base funding target for education by 2005-06, compared to the funding announced in last year's budget for the 2002-03 school year. We are on track to meet and exceed Dr Rozanski's recommendation that funding increase by $1.8 billion over three years. In this upcoming 2003-04 school year, we will invest a record $15.3 billion in Ontario's education system. This represents an increase of more than $1 billion, or almost 8% more than the funding announced last May, while enrolment is projected to be about 2% lower. Our government is clearly focusing the education system on where it must be: on improved student learning.

I'd like to turn now to curriculum. I'm very pleased to say that the province-wide standardized curriculum is now in place for every grade, from kindergarten to grade 12. It sets high standards of achievement for every student. It responds to the demands of parents for a curriculum that is clear, consistent and describes in detail what students should be expected to learn in each grade. And it will help ensure that all students are well prepared for success after high school, whether they choose to go to university or college or into the world of work. A total of $370 million over five years, from 1998 to 2003, was committed to support the implementation of the new curriculum. From that amount, $70 million will have been allocated to support teacher training and $80 million to provide other professional supports and resources. Our government will continue to support teacher development and training in the Ontario curriculum in the future.

We've also established an ongoing review process to ensure that the curriculum remains current and relevant in every grade. There is strong evidence that student achievement is improving as a result of initiatives such as the new curriculum and under the educational leadership of our teachers and those who work in the sector. We continue to see improved results in provincial, national and international testing. I just want to discuss that later in some detail.

I'd like to turn now to teaching excellence. We recognize that there is an enormous contribution being made every day in this province by very dedicated, hard-working and capable teachers. We have implemented several initiatives to support teaching excellence. We know that parents always want the assurance that teachers have the most up-to-date skills and knowledge. The professional learning program now requires all certified teachers in Ontario to successfully complete 14 professional learning courses over five-year cycles to maintain their teaching certificate with the college. To support this requirement, our government has committed $5 million for distance learning, on-line courses and other courses. We want to be sure that there are a sufficient number of low-cost, easily accessible professional learning resources available to teachers across the province. As well, teacher performance appraisals have been implemented. New standards will ensure that teachers are evaluated regularly, and in a consistent manner, on their ability to use their skills and knowledge in the classroom. Teachers will also have the opportunity to receive feedback and support. In April of this year, more than 8,500 prospective teachers wrote the first Ontario teacher qualifying test, and 97% passed. Those who were unsuccessful have the opportunity to write a future test.

The qualifying test promotes accountability and, again, it gives parents the assurance they've asked for that new teachers entering the system have a solid foundation of knowledge and skills to help students achieve success. We're also working to attract and retain teachers in all subject areas, because we know how important the influence of a teacher is to the success of Ontario's young people. We have actually increased student spaces at Ontario's education faculties. From 1999 to 2003, 6,000 new spaces for students have been created at these faculties. That is an increase of 24% over the previous five years.

In October, we also committed $1 million to recruit more teachers, especially in the areas of math, science and technology. There was a recent recruitment campaign called "Be the Spark." It was a joint effort of the government, the Ontario Teachers' Federation, the Ontario College of Teachers, the Ontario Council of Directors of Education and the Ontario Association of Deans of Education. We've also relaxed the teacher pension plan rule to allow more retired teachers to work up to 95 days each year as substitute teachers. It is important that we do everything we can to ensure that we have well-qualified teachers to teach our children. It's important.

I'd now like to turn to early reading and math strategies. Strong skills in reading, writing and math are fundamental to the success of all children, whether in their school life or in their future. I think we all recognize that the research indicates that it is preferable and important to instill these basics from the earliest age. Our early reading and early math strategies will help ensure that all students from junior kindergarten to grade 6 gain the solid foundation they need in reading, writing and math. We presently invest $70 million every year to improve the reading skills of students from JK to grade 3. Last year, we committed an additional $30 million in one-time funding to expand the early reading strategy to grade 6 and to introduce the early math strategy. Both strategies include a combination of setting improvement targets and providing supports to teachers, students and parents to help them reach their targets.

One of the initiatives that we have found to be very successful and in demand is the parent guides we have developed for both reading and math to help parents support their children as they learn these important skills. In fact, we've also had a lot of grandparents ask for the guides so that they can help their grandchildren.

The early reading strategy also includes intensive support to a selected number of schools where grade 3 reading performance has been consistently low. This year, 29 schools are participating. They have each developed a plan to improve their students' reading scores. They are given additional resources, training and the assistance of early literacy experts to improve the reading skills of their primary students.

I've had the opportunity to visit some of these schools this past year and I have to tell you that I've been impressed by the hard work and commitment of the principals, teachers and other staff in those schools to helping students achieve success. I'm pleased to say that we are already seeing improvement in the grade 3 reading scores in many of the schools participating in the program. More schools will be selected in the 2003-04 school year. I don't think there's anything more satisfying than the look on a child's face when they learn to read and know they're able to do well.

In order to more effectively teach reading and math in the early grades, our government also established two panels of education experts to determine the core knowledge and teaching practices that are required.

Teachers and principals will soon gain the benefit of additional tools and strategies. For example, as part of the implementation of the early reading strategy and the early math strategy, teachers will receive resources and training in a wide range of research-informed instructional techniques. This will include how to create and enhance children's phonetic awareness. These tools and strategies will help teachers make the informed choices they need to make about which teaching method works best for their students. It really is up to teachers to make those decisions. They're in the best position to do so.

The in-depth training program for junior kindergarten to grade 3 teachers and elementary principals is based on core knowledge and best teaching practices taken from the early reading and early math expert panel reports.

I'd like to turn now to student achievement. Our government realized the need for early reading and early math programs because of the results provided by standardized testing. We now know how our students are doing, and we know how we can best support our students to do even better. Regular testing has provided us with an effective way of measuring how our students are learning and how they're doing in comparison to other jurisdictions. Student achievement has improved as a result of the new curriculum, the early reading and math programs and, of course, the tireless work of the students themselves, their teachers, their parents, the trustees and members of school staffs.

Provincial, national and international results show that Ontario students are performing as well as or better than students anywhere in the world when it comes to reading, writing, math and science. In fact, I want to share some of the results. They are truly impressive. I can tell you that we have people who come to this province to meet with the staff of the Ministry of Education to see why we're doing so well.

Let's turn to reading. The 2001 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study results show that in Ontario, 9- and 10-year-old students ranked higher than students in Quebec, the United States, Germany, Hong Kong, Norway and Israel, as well as at least 20 other jurisdictions. Last year, 55% of grade 6 English-language students achieved the provincial standard on the EQAO assessment in reading, compared with 48% four years ago.

In writing, last year 55% of grade 3 English- and French-language students achieved the provincial standard on the EQAO assessment. This compares favourably to 49% for English-language and 42% for French-language students only five years ago.

The 2002 school achievement indicators program assessment showed Ontario's 13-year-old English students ranked first -- I repeat, first -- in Canada among English-language students, and our French students improved their ranking from 15th to sixth -- impressive results indeed.

In mathematics, the Trends in International Math and Science Study shows the average for Ontario grade 8 English-language students has increased by 15 points since 1995, compared with an increase of two points internationally. Now, this is truly impressive. Only one other jurisdiction in the world saw a better increase.

Since 1997, Ontario's ranking for 13-year-old French-language students has increased from 15th to fifth among 18 Canadian jurisdictions in the problem-solving component of the school achievement indicators program, or SAIP, assessment of mathematics. Last year, 58% of grade 3 English-language students achieved the provincial standard in math on the EQAO assessment compared with 43% five years ago. Also, 63% of grade 6 French-language students achieved the provincial standard in math compared to 55% five years ago.

Let's turn now to science. According to the TIMSS, since 1995, averages for Ontario's grade 8 English- and French-language students have increased respectively by 20 and 30 points compared with an increase of only three points internationally. Again, this is truly impressive.

Our education reforms are working, and these results clearly show that Ontario students and teachers are rising to the challenge. Through our participation in the Ontario Educational Leadership Centre, we are also working to provide students with a unique opportunity to develop and enhance their personal and leadership skills through the fine arts, music, athletics, diversity education and student advocacy.

Now I'd like to turn to a group of students who have always been near and dear to my heart, the students at risk. We all recognize that not all students learn and achieve or can be evaluated at the same rate or in the same way. The new curriculum provides remedial course support for students who would have difficulty with the grade 10 literacy test. As I mentioned earlier, based on the advice of the task force chaired by Barry O'Connor, director of the Limestone board, we are implementing the recommendations through the $50-million Graduate in Ontario by Achieving Literacy Standards, or GOALS, strategy. This strategy will help students in grades 7 to 12 who need extra assistance in reading, writing and math so that at the end of the day, they can successfully move on to the workplace or to further education. The program will include new approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy. It will provide flexible school timetables and a full-credit literacy course equivalent for diploma purposes in grade 12 to the grade 10 literacy test. So students in grade 12 who have not passed the literacy test will now have the opportunity, beginning in September, to have their reading and writing skills assessed, meet the required standards and be one step closer to obtaining their secondary school diploma.

We've also established expert panels on literacy and numeracy and a working group to suggest other pathways to support our students at risk. In 2003-04, student-focused funding will flow $580 million to boards to help students achieve higher standards. This includes $358.3 million through the learning opportunities grant for programs such as remedial reading, early literacy, literacy and math programs from grades 7 to 12, summer school programs and the new student-at-risk component; $190 million through the language grant for English as a second language.

There will be $15 million through the language grant; and $20 million through the continuing education grant. We're also going to be flowing money for special education. This year it's expected to increase to almost $1.65 billion, an increase of 41% since 1998-99.

I think it is apparent that the changes we have made in the system, building on the strong foundation, are allowing more and more students to achieve success.