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| Ontario | 38e | 1e | Discours sur l’éducation | 17 novembre 2004 | Gerard Kennedy | Minister of Education | Ontario Liberal Party |

Thank you, Mr Vice-Chair. It's good to be back in estimates, in slightly different capacities than the last time we met, I think. It is a pleasure to be here with education, on behalf of the government.

The government said in its throne speech that this is its first priority, and therefore it's quite appropriate that we would be here today explaining that priority. Also, in the context of estimates, the government made a decision to positively support the efforts of public education in this province. It has done that, we think, in a responsible fashion; we have identified specific investments that needed to be made.

The context, I think, that will be familiar to returning members of the House, and probably for some of the new members as well, is that education was underfunded in this province for quite a long time. For at least the last eight years, it saw declining shares on almost every measure, such that on a per student basis, on a per capita basis and on a share of GDP, education received less priority. In fact, according to a Statistics Canada report of a few weeks ago, we were the only jurisdiction in Canada to see education that way. All our colleague provinces invested more in education and we were the only ones taking money away from student accomplishment and student support.

We have acted rather significantly in that context. There was, of course, in the year before the election, a report by Dr Mordechai Rozanski, of the University of Guelph. In that report, Dr Rozanski made very clear that there were not just shortfalls, in terms of support, but specific deficiencies. The specific deficiencies were very similar to the ones that we as a then opposition party had put forward for investments, and they bear a significant relationship to what we have done to date.

In terms of investments, we put forward, first of all, in December 2003, approximately $112 million immediately upon coming into government. We did that because we apprehended that some of the needs were most acute for students who were struggling the most, in particular students who -- and these are circumstances that I don't think we would call inherent barriers, in the sense that there isn't any reason that a student from a low-income background or a single-parent family, or a recent immigrant, cannot succeed in education. But the barriers they have are greater than for other students. The idea of investing in overcoming those barriers on the part of the system is that it is a smart thing to do at the earliest stage possible.

There was a pre-existing grant that was much smaller, which was the largest part of our effort there: the learning opportunities grant. The previous government had decided, despite the advice they received from their expert panels, to significantly reduce the support available to the particular education endeavour of helping these vulnerable students whose education attainment has been well-proven in research to be related to the background they are coming from, and we started to reverse that, first of all in December of last year, and then we followed up with further investments when the annual grants to school boards were made.

Our overall approach has been to do, I think, in terms of the Rozanski report, both a catch-up in terms of the things that were underfunded, specifically, and a keep-up in order to make sure we don't fall further behind. That's what informed our announcements of May of this year, when we put forward most of the dollars that are under scrutiny here today. That would have to do with a broad set of investments totalling $854 million, bringing our total investment to about $1.1 billion.

The one component I would mention is that we invested $100 million in special education at the end of the year, because problems with the system for identifying special education needs generated $100 million in claims that had not been predicted. They weren't predicted by the Ministry of Education, and they weren't predicted by the boards themselves. So an additional $100 million in claims came forward, in addition to the $112 million that we put forward as an initiative in December, which we made available to boards in July.

We think our subsequent allocation that became effective this school year has a very considered set of objectives to attain. Some of them are not very glamorous. For example, we are putting forward dollars to help keep schools cleaner. A cleaner, safer schools grant is putting in extra resources to catch up with problems. What kind of problems are those? Well, in the province of Ontario we have an accumulated facilities deficit that is very, very significant and that needs attention. It is the result, we're told, of an inadequate amount of resources to keep up those buildings in the first place. So, in some ways, a metaphor for some of the work we have to do in education is that simple, unglamorous thing of keeping the buildings clean and safe, so that the children are in a good learning environment, but also so that we're doing proper stewardship. We really have buildings that are in worse shape today because of the economies taken by the previous government.

We have made some significant measures toward reducing that deficit and that problem. One element of it is specifically giving school operations dollars in such a manner that boards will once again let communities use their facilities. All across the province, we've had empty school fields, shut gymnasiums and classrooms perfectly suitable for community purposes not being available to the community. So part of the school operations grant, which is part of our transfer to school boards, was increased by $20 million to permit those agreements to take place. The Ministry of Tourism and Recreation has been very helpful in facilitating the development of agreements with the boards and getting those agreements arranged, because we do understand very well that in all of our efforts to promote education funding, it's not a one-size-fits-all approach that can succeed.

The Ministry of Tourism has been working that out with individual boards. We've seen reductions in the order of 90%, at least in some of the boards, in the fees they've been charging. We will be tracking the results from that investment. What we think it will result in is increased use, certainly. There will be community groups that will be able to afford the use of the schools.

For example, the Scarborough Hurricanes is a basketball team that couldn't hold tournaments in Scarborough. They actually had to go to York region or somewhere else. Last year alone, they generated $3 million in scholarships for their members. This is a credible recreation effort that develops their students and supports their academic attainment, but they couldn't use Toronto schools because they couldn't afford them. They now can, or they will be able to under the fruition of this agreement, and they're already working with the Toronto Catholic board in that respect. So that investment is also helping. It's a permanent investment; in other words, it is money that goes to boards every year, as long as they maintain access for a nominal cost. That's the basic arrangement that's been worked out with them.

We also, in terms of some of the basic initiatives, have put forward dollars to deal with the costs of keeping up in a general way, so for the first time, actually since the funding formula came into existence in 1997, there has been an actual, honest keeping up; in other words, every grant has increased 2% across the board, because the costs also increase for school boards.

Previously, and this is the insidious part that we have to turn around on the part of school funding, the previous government would ask boards to absorb that, and they would absorb one, two, and then six or seven years' worth of no increases in an area. What you had in the administration of our school system were people who became very good at cannibalizing one part of the system to help another. Untangling that is going to take us more than one year, but certainly we've made investments in each and every area, just to help us keep up.

We also dealt with what I think has been a very sore issue in the province for the entire time the province has taken over education funding, and that is transportation. We invested $20 million in transportation, as Dr Rozanski asked for -- at least a significant portion of what he asked for -- and an additional $13 million is a keep-up, to make sure that we can help the boards keep up with their costs.

In the context of doing that, we've put forward a funding formula for discussion. It's another element in terms of what we think is good stewardship. We're trying very hard not to make unilateral changes. A lot of what we have out there, in terms of the $16 billion invested, was done unilaterally by the government of the day, and yet we have 72 school systems, 4,800 schools. It doesn't make sense to make those decisions without having the full benefit of feedback.

There are a series of consultations that have been undertaken on the transportation formula. We've been very honest with boards, saying, "The transportation formula looks like this now. You get a chance to, if you'll pardon the pun, kick the tires. You get a chance to look at whether or not these underlying rationales make sense and whether this is a fair funding formula." That's the first time that's been done with provincial funding, and we think at the end of the day we're going to come up with a fair, effective and adequate way of funding transportation. But that is also where we invested $20 million.

We have put forward dollars for a salary increase across the system. Our particular approach there is to look at making sure that teachers and education workers don't fall behind. We think that's quite important. They have in years past, so there's a 2% guideline there. Inflation is running about 1.8%, and we think that's reasonable in the circumstances.

We're asking for the active support of our education workers. We have exhibited, we think, a pretty significant and consistent policy of respect toward them on a number of fronts. We need their active engagement in the things that need to be done to help education improve. We think this is another part of that engagement of respect, because the other investments we're making we think are important to have in the system today to have the impact they need to have on behalf of students.

Some of those investments include things like lowering class size. About $90 million has gone specifically toward making the classes for primary students smaller. The impact of that has reached about 38% of the primary schools in the province. About 1,100 teachers were hired, and that can have some quite dramatic effects. There is school after school where it has ended split grades, where it has brought down averages that were once 26 down to 19, simply because that deployment of an additional teacher has a very positive, cascading effect.

The implication, we believe, will be a much better start to school on the part of those students. We would infer -- I mean, there is some evidence for this in terms of previous class size reduction projects around the world -- that it would pay for itself by the time the kids who are in today's grade 1 would graduate, that there is enough chance of detecting challenges, of enhancing school performance, that you would avoid some of the extra costs that you run into with students who are struggling in the future. So we will continue with that in subsequent years, but we think we have made a very significant first step in terms of reducing class sizes.

The class size reduction itself is part of a broader strategy to provide resources in support of getting every 12-year-old in this province to the state that I think everyone would agree is necessary for their future advancement, which is a high level of literacy, numeracy and comprehension.

So as we look at our investments, we attach them to some of the objectives we want to accomplish. That's probably the leading objective we have right now. We see the difficulties we have in high school. We have kids and young adults in grade 10, still around one in five, who are struggling to show a basic attainment in the literacy test, and a significant number who are struggling with their program, especially in the applied part of the offerings in grade 9 and grade 10. We really need to address the potential of those students far before they get into grade 10 or into high school. So the investment we've made on lowering class size is part of that, and so is our support for a literacy and numeracy secretariat.

For the first time, really, the ministry will be involved and engaged in the strategies that boards use to help advance academic achievement. There have been much smaller programs in the past, but this will allow us to do a number of things: teacher training on a very wide scale. We have over 7,500 teachers who took training over the summertime as part of this initiative, another 8,000 teachers who were trained as lead teachers, which is a more significant training taking place over six days that makes them expert in the kinds of teaching that need to happen for literacy and numeracy. And 8,000 is on the way to 16,000 teachers. We will have two in every school: a lead literacy and a lead mathematics teacher in primary and also two in the junior division coming up, to make sure that every school has, in fact, the teaching leadership it requires and that they'll be involved with the rest of the staff. So every single primary teacher is going to get upgrading in terms of training and every single school will have four individuals who get intensive training as part of what we're looking at.

So basically, around the province, we'll be very focused on giving students their best shot of being able to move forward. It is something we can enable from the government. We can also piggyback a lot of existing efforts on the part of school boards. Again, if there's an axiom for what we're doing, it is that there is diversity out there and that one size doesn't fit all, and that's a road to error and, frankly, wastefulness in terms of how we can approach some of the things we want to have happen.

The literacy and numeracy secretariat will ensure that we respond according to the needs of individual boards. There will be an effort made to outreach to boards, to look at how their students are achieving, to look at the plans they have for how well they're doing and what they intend to have happen, and there's some ability to respond in a customized way.

We think our obligation is to make sure every student succeeds. That doesn't mean we're obliged to treat every student the same. They have to have the same outcome. There are a lot of different paths there. There's a lot of individuality on the part of the students and of their circumstances. Part of that is the communities they live in and the resources available. There's a big difference from the schooling experience that can be offered currently in the north versus rural versus suburban and urban. If we're going to be able to make sure those are similar successes, we've got to allow each of those areas to meet their needs accordingly and not try and -- if I can put it this way, we're not making them fit the funding formula, we're making the funding formula fit the needs of those students.

So you'll see that as a consistent outcome and certainly as an intention on the part of the dollars we're deploying this year. There are specific dollars that are allocated to the literacy and numeracy secretariat. We are also moving forward with an initiative that is probably the toughest single legacy item we have. I think it is unfortunate that we didn't have progress in literacy and numeracy for the last three years, essentially; there was no going forward on the tests that were taken provincially. This year there is some progress for the first time.

But a more outstanding problem is the increased number of school leavers without diplomas. The double-cohort year that was so well talked about in this province, I think, was mainly assessed initially as a problem for those university- and college-bound students who would be competing with the last round of the grade 13 classes, that there would be double the competition for spaces. Well, it turns out that that did happen, but the students really kind of outsmarted the problem: They went early and they went late, and they basically adjusted. By and large, it looks like they, and the university-bound students in particular, will have been able to get into an institution in similar numbers. For the college-bound, it's a little bit mixed right now, for a reason I'm about to tell you.

But the people who in the past would have gotten high school diplomas didn't. The school leaving rate, according to Dr Alan King at Queen's University, has gone up from 22% to 30%. That means we've got 48,000 students without a diploma. That's 12,000 more than there would have been under the last system. We think that's significantly problematic. The last government had two prior reports from Dr King. They knew explicitly that this was likely to happen, and yet there were no real significant adjustments made in order to facilitate success for these particular students.

There is now a student success program underway. It's too early -- we'll know in about a month's time how well our interventions have worked and what early impact we'll have on that number. But I would put to you, and I would not expect a lot of disagreement, that even 22% is too high a level of students not getting at least a diploma, not getting some education attainment that they can then use. If you look at the job market, you'll find very clearly that the jobs for anyone with less than a high school diploma are drying up very quickly. In 2003 to 2004, there was something in the order of a 26% reduction in the growth in those jobs. I'm not talking about the total number of jobs, but the growth is very, very minimal relative to, for example, the growth for university or college graduates.

One of the related issues, though, for what we refer to as curriculum casualties is that we may not have, according to Dr King, the same number of people going to college. A lot of these people are not just people who would have got their high school certificate but would have ended up going into college technical programs and being a skilled part of the workforce. Because this problem was not addressed despite the significant warnings that went off in the system, that is a very real possibility. In fact, some of the application numbers to colleges this year suggest that that effect is indeed underway.

So it is our intention to lower the dropout rate, to do that first in the context of helping the students who are already in the system and even those who have just left it. We don't think we should give up on those students. They shouldn't be victimized simply because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. There is a variety of things we think we can do even if they go beyond the traditional school system. We're looking at that. There's a GED program in terms of being able to get your high school afterwards, there is work we can do with our community colleges, and we're looking at a broader strategy. But I think you can understand we first focused on what we could do with the ones who came back to school, and a large number did. Last year, an extraordinary number of students kept trying to get their credits. So we were in a position to be of some help to them. We have student success coordinators at every school board around the province. We've been able to get new and innovative programs going, and we're going to further that effort this year with some specific investments we're making. It's an ongoing element that we would like to see developed, though, into a full-blown different role for the high schools of this province.

So we're starting with the crisis we were left, but we're moving away from that into where I think we would want to be in any event. Even if this problem had not become exacerbated, we would want to be in the business of getting a good outcome for every student in school. The days are well gone when we could say, "Well, if half of the kids go to college and university," which is our number, "then that's good enough." We can't do that any more. We can't afford to have students not reach their full potential.

If you look at the competition that's out there right now globally, it's all based on education. Look at the jobs that are going to, for example, some provinces in India that have done a fabulous job of educating their residents. They're getting not data entry jobs but data analyst jobs off of Wall Street, and no doubt some off of Bay Street. If we want to be able to keep an education advantage in this province, we have to address some of these underlying trends very directly.

What we see happening, and what we're starting to invest in this year, is a development toward keeping 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds who haven't attained their diploma in learning situations for longer. The principal way we're going to do that is by coming up with new kinds of programs for apprenticeships, co-op programs and a whole range of things that we think are already in pretty good evidence in this province but need to be expanded and need to have commitment from the provincial government.

We're in discussions with employers -- and we'll soon take it to a public level -- around an alternative diploma. There are students who can attain a lot academically under the current system, but they may not get the 30 credits they are seeking for a variety of reasons, but we can accomplish something in a work experience setting that should be creditable. This is something that should be able to stand them in good stead.

If we can change the outlook on the part of employers and probably as well on the part of families -- I mean, one of our biggest challenges in Ontario today is that most parents want their kids to go to university. That's laudable. We want parents to be ambitious on behalf of their students. But the numbers come in something like 81% expect their son or daughter to succeed at university. Ontario is the most successful jurisdiction at putting students into university, even today, and it's 28%. So we can't be saying to the balance between those two numbers that somehow they're not succeeding. That's something we're going to have to work on.

If you go to some other jurisdictions, Europe, for example, there is a different expectation on the part of parents. It's more balanced; it's 30% and 40% that will expect that.

We want to drive for the highest education attainment possible. If we can improve on 28%, we're certainly going to do that, but somewhere within that we've got to realize there are students who are not reaching their potential, who may not be getting their high school diplomas, but they'll also not being getting very much traction in their employment and their other aspirations. We think something can be done about that. We have the facilities in terms of our high schools to take care of some of the things where we would normally wait till somebody was 21, 22 or 23, becoming unemployed, and then the current federal system would offer them some kind of training opportunity. We think that can be done much more effectively in terms of looking at students reaching their potential, some of it academic, some of it work-related, while they're still in school.

There are other countries that are much better at this than we are, and we think we can make that change. Next September will be an expansion of our efforts in that regard. We do have significant efforts underway right now. Some of it is reflected here in the estimates. Some of it is reprofiling; for example, dollars the previous government put forward for what's called a teacher advisory program, which was put in with good intentions, I think. It cost in the order of $56 million. Somewhere in the design something went badly wrong. In many schools that I visited, students were being offered half an hour a week to sit down with a teacher -- it may not be the homeroom teacher; it could be somebody else; it may not be a teacher they even knew very well -- with group of 20 or 30 students to talk about their aspirations for their lives.

I don't remember my teenaged years that well, but that just doesn't sound that plausible even on paper. Sure enough, you'd be there in the middle of winter, you visited the TAP class, they'd just be getting their coats off and starting to talk and half an hour would be up. Despite a lot of effort around the province -- and it's gone on for six years. I've been in gymnasium after gymnasium, assemblies and so on and I've had high school students vote on whether TAP was a useful experience. I think there was one student in Owen Sound who voted for it and was roundly booed by everyone else.

The point here is that this $56 million could be used instead for remedial assistance, a variety of things. We've put that out there to the school boards, and we're hoping to conclude discussion about that this year in terms of how it could be better used in favour of students. So we're putting some of those dollars to work.

We're expanding our vocational facilities. They've also been let go for quite some time. There's $20-million worth of renovation that we're going to be doing for our technical facilities. There are some good facilities out there, but really we're not in that game to the extent we once were. Vocational has not been, in recent years, something that is for children and young adults who have aptitude for that. It becomes more of a place to send students you don't know what else to do with, and that can't be. We've got to be able to give that program legitimacy.

There was some effort last year to address some safety issues in some of these. You may remember the shop class that you were in. It's probably still using the equipment that you did when you were in school, because that's how dated some of the facilities are that we have -- not that people in this room are that dated. It's a situation that we think is one part of an approach that says to students -- because we have to change parent attitudes, we have to address employers so that they will be involved. We need a tremendous amount of co-operation from employers, and I have to tell you that the initial feedback the Premier and I are getting is very, very strong.

The C.D. Howe Institute says it very clearly: The only economic policy in Canada is its education policy. That's what we control that can make an intrinsic difference to the quality of life for our society and for our economy. There are other things that people talk a lot more about, but it's clearly there that we're going to get the enterprising, that we're going to get the kinds of people who are going to be valued by employers, large or small, or are going to become employers, large or small, by dint of their own efforts.

So that's the kind of thing that we have very much started to put on the rails this year. It's going to take a shift in the schools themselves. The students are going to have to want to do this and the schools are going to have to see this as part of their role, because somewhere in the last dozen or so years there's basically been a streamlining of schools toward university- and college-only preparation. There is not really a strong program for reaching the rest of the students, so we're kind of building on some of the efforts, but there is still a lot more to be done.

So I think that we have put forward performance dollars into the system, as well as dollars that will help it to have stability. Certainly, we believe that progress depends on peace and stability. While we're here in estimates -- and I certainly believe in the estimates scrutiny and welcome it from you in a few minutes. And it is about the dollars. I think there has to be a place you answer questions about the dollars you put forward.

Probably our major accomplishment in education didn't cost us anything. We've got a fair amount of enthusiasm taking place in our schools. We see parents having a higher degree of confidence in the schools they're visiting. They see some of the changes taking place, whether they're the smaller class sizes or a cleaner hallway.

Next year, we're putting out $2 billion for repairs. It's taking that time for boards to get their proposals ready, but we are going to pick up some of that deficiency for the first time. So we're expanding the renewal dollars for school repairs very significantly. Currently we pay about $340 million per year, and we're going to put a one-time $2 billion on top of that in order to help catch up some of the places in your communities that simply aren't at the standard we would want them to be at. We can't say there's a higher value in education and we can't be convincing about that with students if they are in facilities like, for example, Nelson Mandela School here in Toronto. It's a terrific name, but it doesn't deserve to be on that building. There are rusty staircases; there are washrooms for the JK kids where water comes periodically pouring through. Certainly, these needs have to get addressed, and that's part of what we're planning to do. This year, we made some small start with that, doing some energy retrofitting in buildings and so on, but boards are lining up very enthusiastically on what we can do with that.

The mix here is student achievement going forward in the context of a rounded investment, picking up on some of the problems, and building some of the confidence that we need, because education is no longer a matter just for government and school boards; we need the enthusiasm of the public to make it happen as well.