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| Ontario | 38e | 2e | Discours sur l’éducation | 1 novembre 2005 | Gerard Kennedy | Minister of Education | Ontario Liberal Party |

It is a pleasure to be here. I'm joined today by Deputy Minister Ben Levin and assistant deputy minister Nancy Naylor. I want to say at the start that we have a very hard-working bureaucracy and support group at the Ministry of Education who have done a tremendous amount on behalf of students in this province, working with and forming, for the first conspicuous time in a long while, a real partnership with our education sector, comprised of our 72 school boards. I mention that off the top because it's no mean feat. It is something that I think every government probably aspires to but, for whatever reasons, one of the qualities of the environment that we found coming in was that that partnership didn't exist, at least not fully and certainly. Some would say the opposite conditions were in place in at least a large part of the province.

Part of our approach in education since gaining government has been to create a climate for student success. When I say "climate," that's not just programs, that's not just funding; it's also how the dynamics of education work best, and particularly what is the right role for the Ministry of Education, which, among ministries, is relatively small in the actual number of people who work under the aegis of the minister, but it is instrumental.

The outlook that we bring is characterized as the new 3Rs. The new 3Rs in education in Ontario are respect, responsibility and results. The first of those, in terms of respect, is how to get the best dynamics from the various constituent parts of the education effort. That means everyone is involved, from parents to students, teachers, education workers, trustees, the school board administration, but not limited to what people have seen as those who work full-time in the education system or have an abiding interest in it. That simply isn't sufficient for us to be able to do the task at hand.

The task at hand and the reason why respect is so important is that we have to not simply do well; we have to make up for some time that was lost. Part of the context, and where we try and instil this environment of respect, has been where we had 26 million lost school days to students because of lockouts, strikes or protests; also, where we had a drain away from the consensus position of governments of all political stripes since Confederation, which is that publicly funded education should be adequate -- should be excellent, in fact -- sufficient that people send their kids to that system. We saw, for the first time since these statistics were kept, a significant draining away of kids leaving the system under the last administration. We understand that respect means we have to take into account the views of existing parents who may have made other choices under conditions of duress.

We felt it is very important to make that, first and foremost, the way we tried to bring together the significant capacities of the system, so we have made a number of initiatives in that regard. Last year, we terminated the supervision that was put in place by the previous government, which was proven to be without economic foundation. There may have been other, more political goals. The general outlook has been one of trying to extend respect to the trustees in that instance, to the people in each instrumental part of the system, by working as a provincial government to first of all declare that we're not the final authority. We don't have all of the answers when it comes to getting a complex system. It is, I think, important for the people of Ontario to realize that we have one of the largest cohesive education systems in North America, with two million students, 4,800 different schools, 72 school board administrations and a number of school authorities besides, and four different ways of expressing publicly funded education in this province. To be able to do that, we felt it was very important to try and build coherent working relationships. We feel that the first full school year we had, as well as the part of the 2003 year where we were able to make an impact, was about building a platform of respect, stability and peace within the system so that it could focus on the real job at hand.

I would characterize what we have ahead of us as a turnaround year for this system. It is one where progress does need to be made. I think we spent our time in the first two years making sure that all the ingredients were in place, putting a number of the resources, plans and ideas forward so they would have time to generate those results, because that is not just an important element, in and of itself, and what it means for better student performance, but it also means that we have an ability to reconnect some of the public when we're able to do that.

That's what "responsibility," the second R, means to our ministry. We're taking responsibility and we're trying to define it better: What the provincial government actually does vis-à-vis the boards. We certainly accept that funding is part of that responsibility, but there are other elements to it as well. There is a certain amount of focusing that the system requires, there's creating the conditions and the environment in which people succeed. To us, those things matter as much as the investment. What we're asked today to look at is that investment. But of course you will want that investment explained in terms of a context -- are we getting the results? -- which I will turn to shortly. But certainly the responsibility taken by the provincial government has been significant. There's a $2-billion investment that we've made because that was needed, in part, simply to stabilize the system after years of dollars being taken out -- by attrition in some cases and by direct cuts in others -- of an underinvestment in education.

The interesting thing is that it stood in direct contrast to virtually every other jurisdiction. There was no other Canadian province or American state we could find that took money out of education in the preceding eight or 10 years except for the province of Ontario. The province of Ontario fell significantly behind in terms of GDP or population or student population or simply in terms of inflation-adjusted funding. Those are the kinds of things that didn't happen.

In terms of that responsibility, it was outlined quite clearly by Dr. Rozanski in his report to the previous government, where he added a number of things: the idea of responsibility and the idea of adequacy being part of that job; that role for the provincial government.

We have taken that responsibility but not limited it to the idea of funding, the $2 billion that we've put in. We would hope it would be clear that every component of that very significant investment has a strategic impact. It's meant to. It's meant to make a difference, not simply purchasing a certain number of teachers or a certain amount of textbooks, but actually fitting together as a coherent strategy, improving the dynamics and building on the respect that we think we've been able to bring to the system. Our responsibility is certainly to do that, to respond to the discernable needs, and to do that in a way that makes sense.

I can give some examples that are conspicuous for this year. We have a second-year investment, for example, in terms of class size reduction of about $90 million in operations and up to $30 million in capital, because we want to make sure that everything does fit in terms of this enhanced system. I think members of the committee will recognize that it means every child in JK to grade 3 fundamentally will have an improved learning environment. We will take the 18,000 classes that were over 20 and we will be bringing those down assiduously, and bringing those benefits to the learning environment right across the province.

It's part of what we call our Every Child strategy. The Every Child strategy is simply characterized: In our estimation, there is a need to see that every child by the age of 12 has significantly achieved their potential in terms of literacy and numeracy. That is a goal that we have. We've set an interim target for that, which I think most members are very familiar with, so every child should reach their potential. We've said that 75% can actually reach the provincial standard. There were numerous people who said to us, "No, you can't do that. Those results can't be moved." And sure enough, it's true, by conventional wisdom and conventional approach, there had not necessarily been success. There had been no target-setting. There had been no ambition put forward for the system. But we felt, again, it was part of our responsibility. We can't simply invest. We need to be looking for the kinds of strategic things that we need to help boards cause it to happen. That moral purpose of having and making sure matters to us quite a bit. We hope that 12 years old is something that everybody realizes is kind of a demarcation when it comes to the educational development of any child about to become a young adult, about to become pretty familiar with whether or not they've got the capacity to go forward. It's a time of pretty significant self-definition, and if that definition doesn't include academic success by then, we have an enormous task, in terms of the data we have from a variety of efforts, in terms of high school or post-high school, to try and recover that.

So we've made that investment and set those kinds of goals because the final R I'm addressing today, in terms of results, matters significantly. Being able to take up our responsibility and put this forward, I think, has made a great deal of difference in terms of the system being able to then get the permissions it perhaps strongly lacked before to be able to make some of these things happen.

Just as I'd like to give credit to the ministry in terms of being able to pull together a coherent agenda and the supporting programs for that, I want to give credit to the sector, because I think there is already evidence, based on our first year and a half, that the investments, coupled with the commitment and the skill of the people working in the system, have made a difference.

For example, we came in at about a 54% level of achievement, if you average the various tests that are taken by students in the grade 3 and grade 6 environments, and we now are at approximately 62% in terms of their achievement. There is more to be done; there's no question. We have 75% as a marker and we only have the next three school years to achieve that. But we do think it demonstrates already that the premise is sound and that there can be a focus addressed that the system can respond to.

When you unbundle some of those top-line things, you see that we have made progress in areas, for example, with high aboriginal populations -- very strong turnarounds. We've made some investments. Part of the dollars we've put forward have been for lighthouse programs. We're able to take an idea that is either working with a small number of students or one that has high possibilities of working with a small number of students and make that available to more students. It has worked.

In other words, in Ontario we've got all the ingredients we need to be able to bring this forward. It is very much a made-in-Ontario strategy. In some ways we are reinventing how education is able to have this focused capacity, able to work together.

But we're doing that not at the Ministry of Education -- certainly not exclusively -- but at every school board around the province. There are very few boards -- I think we're down to about 12 now -- that have not shifted themselves out and forward from the categories of having averages that are way below others. The movement is very significant. Hundreds of schools have moved forward in terms of their ability to reach the provincial target. It's not the number that matters; it's those students, their teachers, their education assistants, their trustees, deciding this would be important.

I think it's worthwhile noting, because we're here to defend and promote the kind of expenditures that are needed for education, not just because they're what every other country in the world that has aspirations for good jobs and good societal engagements for their citizens is doing, but because on the Ontario merits this is a good investment. That would certainly be the premise of my presentation to you: that the responsibility taken by the provincial government is inclusive of a very strong agenda that merits that kind of investment.

We realize that needs to be demonstrated, because it is a significant investment. There hasn't been an investment like this, of the kind that's been made in the last two years, ever in Ontario education. We didn't have the kinds of deficiencies that were there before or the kinds of stresses and strains, but at the same time, I think there's a very strong upside in terms of seeing how quickly the teachers, how quickly the principals, how quickly the different folks contributing to the educational achievement in this province have been able to show us evidence of things to go forward.

It does not mean in any way, shape or form that we've arrived or that we have any sense of accomplishment fully yet for the system; only that we have evidence that the kinds of things we put forward are bearing some fruit. I think it's very important, because it's been too easy to put "crisis" and "strike" and other things in the same sentence with "publicly funded education in Ontario," and much harder to put "success" in that sentence. I think that's what people are increasingly experiencing at their local school, in their local boards and in their families, in terms of how their students are striving forward.

I think that's what we look at the remainder of our investments being: each of them unlocking some of the potential that students have.

We've made significant investments in terms of special education. I've said to public audiences that I think that's one of the most important developments, and I believe it happened under a Conservative government in 1984. We started to recognize that every student deserved to have an equal chance at an education. We're not there yet in accomplishing that, but it is, I would say, extending citizenship to groups of students who belong in society, who can be as self-reliant as their potential will allow them, simply because that decision was made.

The ability to make that happen is still, at least in good part, ahead of us, but we have significant reforms taking place and investment has already happened. We put in $165 million in our first year. We then put in another $45 million last year, and there's another $40 million this year. We recognize within our group of students the highest number of students with acute special needs of any education system. It matters because we are differentiating some of the needs that are out there in a more effective fashion, but still, our special education reform, which is led by my parliamentary assistant Kathleen Wynne and Professor Sheila Bennett, is making progress in terms of actually turning around from a process that was really based on what problems some of these students with special needs had and more into what kind of educational outcomes we can get, so that if somebody has a severe behavioural problem, what can actually work for them? We're putting ourselves in that business.

It's an instrumental role for the ministry to play, rather than having 72 boards solve that problem by themselves, but still letting the boards customize and tailor their programs to fit the students who are walking in the door. If there's another feature of the juxtaposition between our investment and the results we're trying to get in our taking of responsibility, it's been about that. It's taking a one-size-fits-all funding formula and actually conditioning it into one that now fits more of the reality that a very large province like Ontario has, so we have very significant components that recognize the rural differences in this province, and the urban differences are also featured now in terms of how the funding formula works. We are getting at some those specialized needs.

Members of the committee may be aware that about 75% of our funding is there for every student and about 25% is funding that targets particular outcomes we want to achieve, whether it's special needs or some of the other things we support for rural students and for those in urban areas. They are, I think, really welcome and useful additions in terms of how the system is now able to respond in the way it should, because the hazard of a unitary-funded system is that it could become non-responsive; it could simply be a one-size-fits-all and let the chips fall where they may. Well, those chips aren't chips, in this case; they're kids. They're children and young adults who need to be recognized by their individual instructors, their teachers and their principals as having a certain kind of potential and a certain kind of need.

That individualized instruction goes to the heart of our two main strategies, which are the Every Child strategy I've spent some time talking about in terms of K to 6, and our student success strategy from 7 to 12. We really are trying to emphasize a platform that says we reach children at the time when they can best be reached, which we think is at the earliest age possible. We link very well with the Best Start program that has been brought in by my colleague the Minister of Children and Youth Services, in that expansion of early learning taking place, especially for four- and five-year-olds, and wherever possible within the school environment, with the smaller class sizes, and then with the interventions.

Some of the things we're able to put forward, I think, have been very strongly supportive of that -- more specialized teachers -- and they support our companion strategies, for example, of everyday physical activity, so we have physical education expanded. We have now agreed to have 2,000 more specialist teachers -- 600 this year -- in our schools actually providing for that component. We do that, yes, because it's a good health initiative, in the sense that it makes sense to contribute, not to take over, not to do anything but what parents expect a school to do in terms of the development of students, helping with that in a significant way, as I think a lot of parents assumed schools were still doing or certainly experienced themselves and believed was partly the co-responsibility that could be picked up by the official publicly funded education system. So we're going to be able to do that and we're also instituting daily physical activity to make sure it is an everyday habit we start to acquire.

I had the opportunity to spend some time in a class recently -- I actually visited with the First Minister of Scotland -- where they were doing the daily physical activity, and there were a couple of things that wouldn't be immediately apparent. One was that the kids are so interested in it, they ask for it four or five times a day. They love to do the daily physical activity and the teachers find it makes them better students, because even though there's a strong health implication, the best thing here is, it's good for learning. It also has an ancillary benefit: It's good for teachers, because it gets teachers up there, stretching and doing things at least a few times a week to supplement what's being done by the phys ed teacher. It is, we think, very linked to that goal of getting everyone to reach their potential, or a significant portion of it, in terms of their basic education and their foundational skills by the age of 12. That daily physical activity is a significant part of that, and we've been able to bring that together this year.

Our other main strategy that has had significant investment on our part is the student success strategy. Student success is simply taking a legacy that is, to me, as consequential as any fiscal challenge that the province has as a number -- in some ways more important, because it talks about as many as 15,000 additional students each year not getting a high school diploma and not making the transition to some form of recognized success, not achieving a meaningful outcome in terms of what they're able to get done through their high school career. For some of them, and for too many, unfortunately, it makes them not feel like they've accomplished anything in their entire education career because they didn't achieve that.

That took place because of a variety of factors which we've carefully tried to analyze in terms of where the problems are for Ontario students. Why would we have a 56% four-year graduation rate under the new curriculum brought in by the previous government compared to graduation rates of 68% at the low end and 83% at the high end for comparable provinces, and why would those factors be so much in evidence here?

We think we have many of the answers in terms of that particular challenge, and we're putting them together in terms of our student success strategy. We are looking at a variety of things, some of which we'll announce quite shortly in terms of more detail, but certainly we believe it's very important to, first of all, declare an interest in these students. That's why we will be bringing forward legislation that will raise the school leaving age to 18. In 1921, it was 16. It's simply that times have changed, and changed significantly.

But the real challenge is to have those students want to stay in school, to ensure that the curriculum has them learn as much as possible, so that they get to that meaningful standard that is our high school diploma. We believe that can be done. In fact, we believe there's already been some progress. We think our high school four-year and five-year rates have both improved by about four points. There was an increase from 56% to 60% after one year as a four-year graduation rate, and in the five-year rate it looks to be about 68% to 71% or 72%; so a similar kind of jump there.

But there's a long way to go, and every milestone along that way represents students whose futures are pretty much on the line. There is no really good outcome there for too, too many of the students who aren't able to achieve that diploma. We have a net job shrinkage of about 3.2% every year -- fewer jobs for those of our students who don't achieve a high school diploma. So we understand very well that there's a lot at stake in terms of making sure that they get through.

A lot of the data we've used to inform our strategy are data that have been available to provincial governments for the last three or four years. It was particularly constructed by Dr. Alan King at Queen's University, and it tells us a number of things. For example, it tells us that the high school curriculum, for whatever reason, did not work from the beginning in terms of an entry for the students coming in from elementary. In fact, every minister has known that that grade 9 level where there was supposed to be some beginning differentiation, the ability of students to start to be respected as having different ways of learning, would actually be expressed in terms of the program.

For example, applied math had very high failure rates: less than 75%. Even after two years of remediation, we can say we've only been able to get an extra five points of students passing the test that measures achievement in the curriculum, and the failure rates have been very significant in the actual courses. Only 3% of the students who failed applied math actually got their high school diploma subsequently within four years. It was a sentence to them of a certain kind of educational purgatory where they couldn't get their grade 9 credit; therefore, they couldn't achieve their grade 10 credit. Many of these students had to take this over and over again and it simply, for whatever reason -- I guess maybe a different definition of what the provincial government should be involved in or really defies a full explanation -- is now changed.

We put in place last year, the first year we could, locally developed courses that would allow students to make that transition, and now we have a new applied mathematics course. That math course, just to give you an idea, was a 93% match. So the one third of students who learn differently, who have always, and in all of our education systems, had an option available to them, had an option taken away because the course they were offered was 93% the same. It struggled significantly in terms of students being able to learn that, and the match we've put forward is about a 55% match.

I would say to all members of this committee to look at that curriculum. It is not in any way an easy math course. It is different, though. The way it was originally advertised and intended is that it goes more to tactile learning. It goes to more hands-on kinds of concepts and it is less dependent on abstract mathematics. It has a real-world application. These are students who can take that and apply it as technologists. There's a whole range of good outcomes in the future, but they simply could not do it because the course material wasn't put together for them in a way that was respectful of them. That was something we felt had to be dealt with, and therefore we did, but all the rest of the high school curriculum is intact and is there to challenge students. I will say this: that more students will take more math, will achieve more and learn more because we've made a better entry possible for them into their high school careers.

I would say as well that our overall thrust in student success is exceedingly important. We now have student success teachers available in every school this fall. That's to make sure we don't wait till grade 11 to learn when students are struggling. We will have a teacher whose job it is to carry a caseload of students who are academically struggling.

That caseload we think is very important, to complement what's being done by guidance counsellors, to complement what's being done by principals and to really infuse individual classroom teachers with that sense of respect for those students, because that's really where we think our biggest struggle is, which is unfortunately inherent in our system. There are outcomes that I think many of us went to school under that are being really done well within the system. We have some 33% of students graduating to university, but we can't say to the other 67%, "There isn't a good outcome waiting for you."

That's effectively what has happened because, with the difficulties for students in the applied courses, we've had a reduction in applications to colleges and we simply don't have the same number of students going through to that level of success. As I mentioned before, it's most conspicuous that we have a big jump in students who are not able to get a high school diploma at all.

Our approach there is to make sure that there is remedial and credit recovery available to students, that we're able to provide for them better learning in what they're doing.

There are also a number of other measures we think will help; for example, creating respect for apprenticeships in terms of making that one of the outcomes people strive for for job placements, with training that in our system today had kind of become an afterthought rather than something that was really there and had meaning, because in every respect we are going to ensure that a high school diploma has significant meaning. It must. There are no favours we can do for students by not making sure they learn, and because the curriculum wasn't sized to some of the different potentials students have and start to express by grades 9 and 10, we denied some of them. We basically, as an institution, were not respectful of what they had to contribute in the future, and that is going to change.

We will shortly announce targets for this as well because we think it is so vital that we find ways of moving students forward, that they're actually doing better in terms of their acquisition of credits and ultimately their acquisition of diplomas. We have made an investment there as well. It is a significant investment. There are 1,300 new teachers in our high schools. They're doing two things. They're providing support. For the first time we have class size limits. They apply for some of those courses of our most challenged students in terms of those who may struggle, but they also help to put limits on a wide range of courses because that was simply undermining some of the credibility of our education system under the previous funding and the previous way that support was denied to some of those students.

We have a strategy that incorporates as well some of the best learning we've been able to do. In the last two years, we've spent approximately $36 million on a variety of projects. Again, this is getting the best out of the system. We have a tremendous amount of ingenuity and enterprise within education, so what is learned in Renfrew or what is learned in Windsor needs to be applied in Toronto or Hamilton or anyplace that the same or similar students are coming in the door. Those are the kinds of things that have characterized our spending commitments in the last two years and certainly in this year going forward.

We do believe that progress is going to be based upon a real focusing of efforts on these particular students going forward, but it is not to two-dimensionalize or in any way take away from an enlarged education. Our commitment as a government is to the intellectual, physical and emotional potential of students, and we've shown that with our healthy schools initiative. We will also be bringing forward an arts and education initiative. We understand that a premise, before we can even start to have kids learn, is about safe schools, so we have already brought forward some initiatives: a safe welcome program for elementary schools, and very soon we'll have an anti-bullying program in place and resources for every student affected by bullying. We'll also be reviewing the Safe Schools Act and making sure that we have devices in place that are respectful of students and are fair in every respect in terms of how they come forward.

We have a plan that I think is worthy of the committee's support and worthy of the investment the government has put forward.