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| Ontario | 38e | 2e | Discours sur l’éducation | 25 avril 2006 | Sandra Pupatello | Minister of Education | Ontario Liberal Party |

Thank you, Chair, and a very special thank you to the members of the committee, who were so kind as to select education for an in-depth review over the next nine or 10 hours. I was hoping you might want to make it a little bit longer because we have so much good news to talk about, but it is a great opportunity for us to talk to the people of Ontario and also to look at the issues that might be raised by opposition members, because I think it's in our best interest to watch what it is we are doing and see that we're doing the right things for our kids.

It is a new ministry for me personally. I want to especially thank my deputy, Ben Levin, who's sitting to my left. He is the deputy of education and comes very highly qualified to the Ministry of Education. In my first few weeks -- well, my first few days, frankly; I think this is day 17, isn't it? It feels like a lot more. In any event, on day 17 or so, all I have heard is such wonderful news about the respect that the community in education shows to the deputy of this ministry that I am very proud that we have that calibre here working for the public service of Ontario.

To my right is Nancy Naylor, very well known to many people across Ontario. She's our numbers guru, but the official title is the ADM of the business and finance division. I welcome Nancy here as well.

I hope, as you may have some questions where there is some specificity required, that I have the staff available to you to answer those questions.

Here with us as well is Didem Proulx, who is the director of the education finance branch. She is sitting just behind us here. Also here are Kevin French, the ADM and CAO of finance, and Noah Morris, who is also here from the department of finance, again assuming that there may be questions specific to certain areas, regions, boards. We'll do our best. I will say too that I appreciate the comments of the Chair. We're going to try to get information to you. If there's something that we don't have here, if you'll give us a little bit of time, we'll get some information to you.

To begin, I will say that the grants for this year have not been released and have not been extended to the boards at this point, so some of it will be speculative in nature, things that we're clearly thinking about at this point, issues that we're trying to resolve. So given that our budget was so much earlier this year and we are at estimates at this point already, that doesn't give us the opportunity to give you some of the information that you might otherwise have had if this committee of estimates had sat perhaps later in the year, as it has in the past, because the grants simply aren't out at this point.

Having said that for brief introductory remarks, let me get on to talk about education.

I am so excited to be here in this ministry at such a pivotal time in terms of change and excitement in education for the students across the province, in elementary and in high school. I'm very pleased to talk about our 2006-07 estimates. I think many of us who are in education are quite excited. The Liberal caucus is home to many, many individuals who come from the education field, either as trustees, as chairs of boards, as teachers, as principals -- and all of us as students, certainly. We in our caucus all have a long-standing interest in what is happening in the education portfolio, so the 2006-07 budget that was tabled not too long ago was very exciting for all of us, but in particular it shows that once again this is an education Premier and we're intending to invest in our children. I hope that members from all sides of the House will be very happy about that, because I know that these two gentlemen sitting here today in opposition have a vested interest in us doing very well in this portfolio.

The Ministry of Education's plan to promote a strong, vibrant publicly funded education system is focused on three goals: higher literacy and numeracy achievement; improved high school graduation rates; increased public confidence in public education. To that last point, I think it's important that all of us have the means and the tools to tell our story to the public, that in fact their investment through their tax dollars is going a long way to secure the future of this province. We've set clear and ambitious performance targets for all of these goals. We want to have 75% of all 12-year-olds meeting the provincial standard on province-wide testing in reading, writing and math by 2008, and we want to see 85% of our high school students graduating by the year 2010, or, to put that another way, we want to cut the dropout rate by half. That will mean thousands more students graduating, not dropping out. These goals may be ambitious, but they're essential for all of us. Our children need excellence in education to prepare for a successful adult life. Our province needs excellence in education to create the best skilled workforce that can compete with the world for the best jobs.

I had an opportunity to speak -- my first speech as Minister of Education -- to the Catholic trustees association in London this past week, and I told them a story about the University of Windsor's research excellence centre that focuses on automotive engineering. They rely, in their partnership with DaimlerChrysler, on excellence in the students in their engineering program, the lion's share of whom come from our high schools in Essex county. So it's really important that the kids right up to age 12 do very, very well to prepare them to continue to do very well through high school, because our local automotive industry needs that level of success. So what we do is feeding our local industry for their successful future.

Our government is committed to getting public education right, and that means implementing our Excellence for All agenda, which most of us took out on the road in 2003 and convinced the public that this was the way to go. Despite serious fiscal pressures, we are increasing our grants for student needs -- the GSN funding -- to school boards by more than $400 million in this coming grant release, 2006-07. That will increase it to $17.3 billion. By the 2008-09 school year, the province will provide an additional $2.6 billion in funding to school boards compared to where we started in 2003-04. That is an increase of 18%. That makes it an average funding of almost $9,300 per student compared to where we were at in 2003-04. Over the past few months we've introduced two new bills to help us achieve our goals. That's on top of the many strategies we've already put in place, from smaller class sizes to improved teacher training to expanded intervention programs for struggling students.

In these first remarks today I'd like to share our efforts around literacy and numeracy and high school graduation rates. If time permits, I'll move on to our strategy supporting safe and healthy schools. When we're through with the time we have allotted, I know the opposition members of the committee will be so excited for more that they perhaps would like to give me more of their time so I can continue to pass on the good news that is happening in education.

On higher literacy and numeracy achievement, I'd like to start down the path of success that every student should be able to read, write, do math and comprehend at a high level by the age of 12. That's what our goal is. I'm encouraged by the improvements in student performance shown in the grades 3 and 6 standardized test results released last October by the EQAO. This is the second year of overall improved results in the EQAO.

The result for the 2004-05 school year showed that an average of 61% of Ontario's grade 6 English-language students were meeting or exceeding the provincial standard in reading, writing and math. That's a significant increase from the average of 54% who were meeting the standard in 2002-03 under the previous government. In French-language schools an average of 70% of grade 6 students were meeting or exceeding the provincial standard in 2004-05, compared to an average of 62% in 2002-03, again under the previous government. Last October's EQAO results also showed that the gender gap between boys and girls in grades 3 and 6 is continuing to close, and this is very important. That said, we're very much aware that we've not yet reached our goal of 75% and that large gains become more difficult each year.

We're investing in the success of our students by initiating province-wide literacy and numeracy initiatives. We have some tremendous staff in our Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat who are setting the tone out in the field, and we are hearing tremendous excitement from our teachers, who are seeing the kind of commitment we're making to this area.

We've worked with school boards to create for the first time a coordinated effort across the province to help students reach their potential. The year 2005 saw more than 295,000 students across the province benefiting from 160 programs designed to improve reading, writing and math skills. The programs were coordinated by local boards and supported by an $18-million investment by the province.

We invested $39 million in 2005, rising to $146 million by 2008-09, to hire 2,000 new elementary specialist teachers in key areas such as literacy, numeracy, music, arts and physical education. I know our Olympian member can appreciate the importance of physical education in our education system.

In 2005-06 we funded 66 local initiatives with the purpose of improving classroom instruction and addressing equity of outcome for specific student populations: for example, boys, black students, aboriginal students and special education students. These local initiatives will raise the bar and close the gap in achievement for all students.

As well, approximately 16,000 classroom teachers and 4,000 principals responsible for children in the primary and junior grades will have received multiple days of professional training by June 2006.

On reducing class sizes: Reducing class sizes in the primary grades, JK to grade 3, is the key to giving students the individual attention they need to improve their reading, writing and math skills. Our goal is to put a real cap of 20 children per class in place by 2007-08. Nine times out of 10, there will be 20 students in each primary class. Exceptions will be allowed for the remaining 10% to provide some flexibility for boards. Up to three additional students will be allowed in each primary class as a result of enrolment changes -- in-year changes, for example, as kids move -- to minimize the number of split grades and avoid unnecessary transportation of students.

So far, 2,400 new elementary school teachers have been funded and more than half of Ontario's schools now have smaller primary class sizes. I think this is a tremendous achievement at two and a half years into our mandate. This was accomplished through an investment of $126 million in the 2005-06 school year on top of $90 million the previous year. We have to note that $36 million of that $126 million is to be used for new construction relating to the implementation of primary class size caps.

On the strategies for literacy and numeracy, to achieve better results for students, the government has spearheaded a number of other very important strategies. The government is directly engaging schools and school boards through our innovation at the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. The secretariat provides professional development, targeted funding and expert collaboration with boards on local strategies to see that each child learns effectively. Our government has developed a boys' literacy initiative specifically geared to help improve boys' basic literacy skills. A specialized teaching guide called Me Read? No Way!: A Practical Guide to Improving Boys' Literacy Skills was distributed to teachers. More than $5 million has been allocated to support boys' literacy projects across the province.

I just noticed that we need to have more women on this committee as well. I'm surrounded by boys here.

During the 2005-06 school year, teams consisting of teachers and principals from every school in Ontario had the opportunity to receive training in effective instructional practices to improve literacy and numeracy skills. In 2005-06, the Council of Ontario Directors of Education, that is, CODE, used a grant provided by the minister to fund 85 school board projects aimed at improving literacy and numeracy among students with special needs.

We know we've talked about turnaround teams, targeted support. Our turnaround teams program, with a budget of $10 million, sends experienced educators and early literacy experts to provide tailored supports to schools where primary student achievement in reading has been consistently low. Turnaround teams work with schools to identify needs and develop strategies and provide resources to help students attain the high level of literacy skills they need. Each school participates in the program for a three-year period. More than 100 schools participated in the program in 2005-06, and an evaluation of the program showed significant progress. As of 2005, 84% of schools in the first three phases of the program improved performance in the proportion of students at or above the provincial average by an average of 28 percentage points. I'll just say that again because I think it's remarkable: a 28% improvement in the grade 3 EQAO test during the period they've been in the program.

Early screening and intervention: Students should not have to "fall behind" before they get the targeted assistance they need to succeed. Screening, combined with the appropriate intervention tools, can help teachers identify the particular area of concern for an individual student and determine appropriate intervention. That's why the government has made an early screening and intervention tool available to all school boards. With it, JK, kindergarten and grade 1 students can be screened for potential learning challenges and given the help before it's too late. The early screening and intervention tool known as the Web-based teaching tool, WBTT, promotes early intervention through screening tools. It also has a database of targeted instructional strategies for the students who need them and a place for teachers to reflect on what works so they can build on student success.

The ministry, in co-operation with the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, began making this tool available to all schools in September 2004. As this school year draws to a close, 1,184 schools in 58 school boards are actively using this Web-based teaching tool. This means that over 2,500 JK teachers, over 3,400 kindergarten teachers, 2,200 grade 1 teachers and 369 grade 2 teachers are using this tool to help their kids succeed, and over the next school year, the ministry will be working with the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario to increase the use of the tool among schools in the province. The LDAO will also be undertaking an evaluation of the project's success to date.

Student performance legislation: That brings me to the proposed bill that is currently before the House. If it's passed in its present form, this bill will help us modernize Ontario's school system into one of the best in the country. The proposed amendments to the Education Act and the Ontario College of Teachers Act, 1996 -- I hope you've had an opportunity to see that bill -- would provide the legal support necessary to improve student performance and build a partnership in education that is based on respect. I hope that what has marked the first two and a half years of this government in education is one word: partnership. If passed by the Legislature, the legislation in its present form would clarify ministry and board responsibilities related to those goals, particularly concerning student performance. I'd like to take a few minutes to review some of the key measures in the bill.

Teacher support: Starting with teacher support, we know that to improve student performance we must support the very people who deliver education every day. Support means revoking ineffective pen-and-paper teacher qualifying tests that didn't evaluate actual classroom experience. If the bill is passed, the requirement for teacher candidates to pass the qualifying test as a condition of teacher certification would be revoked. In its place we would introduce a positive second step for beginning teachers, giving them valuable in-class support during their challenging first year of practice. The new teacher induction program would address new teacher retention and development by giving them valuable mentoring by experienced teachers and practical on-the-job training. If approved by the Legislature, this program would become a requirement for approximately 10,000 new teachers each year. Currently, $15 million has been allocated to all boards to begin implementing and supporting components of the program: orientation, mentoring and professional development and training.

The teacher performance appraisal system for new teachers would also be modified. If passed, successful completion of the new teacher induction program would require two satisfactory performance appraisals. The result would be better-prepared and more confident teachers. The previous government showed it didn't support teacher training, because it reduced the number of professional activity days from nine to four, even though the average across Canada is nine. If approved in its present form, the legislation would remove the cap of four PA days a year. We'll then be able to amend the regulation to increase the number of PA days to six per school year and require that some of the additional time be used to promote the government's education priorities. If we are to help our students, we must provide professional development for our teachers. We need to provide them with more opportunities for shared problem-solving and give them access to new, cutting-edge teaching techniques in order to improve student achievement, because better-trained teachers mean better-prepared students.

Board performance: In the area of board performance, the new authority would enable the ministry to set provincial outcomes and require boards to meet these outcomes. Because we believe we must work as partners in education, specific outcomes would be set in regulation after some significant consultation between the ministry and school boards. The legislation would help clearly define government expectations. This would in turn give school boards the flexibility to address local needs when implementing provincial initiatives.

On peace and stability -- one more point about the student performance bill: Part of the ability of students to focus on learning arises from the era of peace and stability we currently enjoy. If passed in its present form, the bill would allow the extension of teacher agreements that expire on August 31 this year from two years to a four-year term. As you know, long-term peace and stability is the foundation for progress in education and success for students.

We're also showing respect for teachers through a revitalized Ontario College of Teachers. We envision a true professional body that has the confidence of its members and the public, and that would be depoliticized and have a majority of classroom teachers on its council to carry out its mandate. If passed, this legislation would give a tremendous boost to improved student performance.

On higher graduation rates: At the high school level, our student success strategy is focused on giving high school students more learning choices and helping more of them graduate. The reason is simple: There's more at stake than ever before. High school students need to get an education that is high-quality, meaningful and prepares them for a variety of post-secondary destinations.

The stats are compelling. High school dropouts earn roughly $6,500 less per year than graduates. That's a quarter-million-dollar pay cut over a lifetime. Four out of every five prison inmates never finished high school. Leaving school early doubles your chance of being unemployed and makes you five times more likely to need income assistance. It's simply not acceptable that we're allowing 29% of high school students to drop out and face these limited choices and uphill battles.

Our student success strategy: That's why the McGuinty government is transforming and modernizing secondary schools through a $1.3-billion student success strategy. It's ambitious, effective and essential to Ontario's future and prosperity. Launched in 2003-04, the first phase of the plan included board-wide student success leaders, innovative lighthouse pilot projects and upgraded equipment and facilities for technology education programs. This helped the graduation rate rise from 68% to 71% in one year.

Last year, we announced phases 2 and 3. The highlights include 1,300 new high school teachers, 800 of whom are dedicated to student success programs; a student success leader at every board; proposed legislation to keep students learning to 18 or graduation; new specialist high-skills majors as part of the regular high school diploma; expanded dual-credit programs to allow high school students to earn several credits through college, apprenticeship and university courses.

Ontario is now helping each student work toward a successful post-secondary destination, whether that's workplace training, college, university or an apprenticeship. It's time we had a 21st-century approach to learning that is relevant to today's student.

Ontario's graduation target: The McGuinty government is confident that the student success strategy will work. By 2010, Ontario will graduate 85% of its students, up from just 68% when our government took office -- 71% in 2004-05. That's a pledge to cut the dropout rate by half in the next five years.

Imagine the entire population of the city of Waterloo wearing caps and gowns. That's about 90,000 people, the same number of additional students we want graduating by 2010. In French-language secondary schools, the graduation rate in 2004-05 was 81%.

Expanded co-op: An important part of the student success strategy is expanding co-op education. The McGuinty government wants more students to reap the rewards of workplace learning so that they can test-drive their careers. As you may already know, students can now apply for up to two co-operative education credits earned after September 2005 toward their 18 compulsory credits. This will provide more flexibility to students who are working toward graduation and want the opportunity to gain a high-quality educational experience outside the traditional classroom. Every student should have the chance to gain the knowledge and experience that only a co-operative education can provide. We're strengthening our partnerships with the business community so that co-op placements will be available to all the students who want them.

Across Ontario, there are thousands of students benefiting from co-operative education. For example, grade 11 co-op students in Sudbury are learning valuable construction skills while working with a local contractor to build a small bungalow. In Niagara, a co-op student at Subluc Dairy not only gained practical, hands-on knowledge and a part-time job; he also got to deliver a newborn calf by himself on the day his co-op teacher came to visit. At Queen's University, a grade 12 co-op student is working as a research assistant in a cytogenetics and DNA research lab. The budding scientist is helping with clinical research lab work to study the genealogy of autism spectrum disorder. How exciting is that? These are just a few examples of the successful co-op placements that I've heard about recently.

Remember, our government's strategy is learning to 18, not classroom to 18. We want students in an education environment that suits their goals and interests while furthering their learning experience at the same time.

It should be of no surprise to you that work experience in high school is highly valued by employers. The Ontario Chamber of Commerce has stated it's essential that employers engage young people in real-life work experiences when they're making career decisions. Ninety-five per cent of Canadian employers see work experience during high school as valuable; however, only 45% of high school students have it. Employers, co-op teachers and government all share the same opinion: Co-operative education provides a wealth of knowledge and experience that every student can benefit from.

Rural student success strategy -- maybe you can let me know how much time I have left in my 30 minutes. Two minutes? Thanks. I have a host of examples from rural Ontario on some great strategies for successful learning that I will share with you in my next allotment.

Let me close now by saying that I have some tremendous staff who are here and available to answer some questions. I look forward to the commentary we might hear from members of the opposition parties, but I believe that despite a difference in political parties, we are here for the same purpose. I believe we are all here for the children of Ontario and want to do better for them. We acknowledge that we have much work to do in education, some of it around grants and some of it around relationships with our boards, how we manage the financial dilemmas that often arise in providing the bread and butter of the schools, and in the meantime keeping our eye on the ball on the kinds of goals we set for all students, whether they be students in a classroom or students through special education, the kind of betterment we have to keep providing in education.

I will end by saying that education is supposed to change. It is supposed to be constantly changing, because that means it should be constantly getting better. I think we demand that for our children.

Thank you, Chair, for having me give opening remarks. I look forward to the next nine hours, and potentially 20 hours, being made available to our committee so we can share the good news and the work of our education Premier, Dalton McGuinty, with the public of Ontario.