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| Ontario | 38e | 2e | Discours sur l’éducation | 18 octobre 2006 | Christopher Bentley | Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities | Ontario Liberal Party |

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and committee members. I'm pleased to be here on behalf of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to talk about our 2006-07 estimates. I know these investments will affect the quality of and access to post-secondary education for years to come.

Many challenges that our economy faces in the first decade of the 21st century include: an aging workforce; the need to integrate newcomers with international work experience; the pace of technological change; and intensifying competition from emerging economies.

The McGuinty government believes that the key to Ontario's prosperity lies in our people. The best jobs and most investment go to the places with the best-educated, most highly skilled workforce. We must nurture that culture. We must cultivate the next generation of critical, innovative thinkers. We must have informed leaders who will lead the province in the future. Investing in the education and skills of our people today leads to increased prosperity and an improved quality of life for us all.

With all of this in mind, last year our government introduced our Reaching Higher plan. This $6.2-billion investment in post-secondary education and skills training is the most significant multi-year investment in Ontario's higher education system in 40 years. It expands the view of post-secondary education from the traditional classroom learning in colleges and universities to encompass apprenticeships and other forms of enhanced skills. Reaching Higher is our strategy for becoming the leader in learning, with important commitments to access, accountability and quality. Our commitment to this strategy is underlined by the historic investments we're making to build the high-quality post-secondary system our province deserves and needs.

Our commitment to building an integrated training and employment system is just as strong. We're training more apprentices. We're bringing together the Ontario government's programs and services to work hand in hand with programs, people and resources from the federal government. At the end of the day, what people care about, whether they're workers, whether they're those unemployed looking for work, whether they're businesses looking for skilled, trained workers, people looking for any type of training -- what they really care about is how to get it. They're not interested in jurisdiction. They're interested in how to get it and simplifying the system. This is our approach for an expanded, highly skilled workforce.

The people of Ontario deserve to have the best post-secondary education system and the best training system in Canada. Our province's future depends on it.

Today I would like to share with you some of the progress we've made under the Reaching Higher plan and look ahead to our plans for the coming year.

If I could turn first to colleges and universities, by 2009-10, the McGuinty government will have provided an additional $1.2 billion in annual operating grants to colleges and universities, or 35% more than the base in 2004-05.

Now, what does this money mean? It means that after years of underfunding, our government is investing in the system to rebuild not just post-secondary education but to rebuild that necessary relationship and glue between government, our businesses, our labour, the people of Ontario.

How far have we come? The evidence is there to be seen. There are almost 86,000 more post-secondary students attending this September than in 2002-03. That is a 5% participation rate increase, a 21% increase in real numbers.

We're doubling our investment in student aid. We've invested to modernize and repair buildings. We've established the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario to monitor quality and access. We're improving access to quality post-secondary education for underrepresented groups and for those for whom distance poses a real challenge.

We're increasing first-year undergraduate medical enrolment by 23%. This includes the introduction of 104 new first-year medical school spaces between 2005-06 and 2008-09, and 56 new first-year spaces at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine, which was opened in 2005-06.

This is the beginning, and we have more to do. We want every student in Ontario to have access to the best post-secondary education in Canada.

In the post-secondary sector, our Reaching Higher plan is built on three pillars: accessibility, accountability and quality.

Let me address accessibility first. Our government believes that access to post-secondary education should be driven by the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. That's why we've made significant investments in income- or need-based aid. Targeting aid to those who need it most is essential. We're increasing our investments in such spending. Over a five-year period, from 2004-05 to 2009-10, we're doubling our investment in student aid, and this includes major new investments in grants.

The McGuinty government invested almost $200 million more to improve student assistance in 2005-06, to promote access and opportunity for low- and middle-income students. OSAP, the Ontario student assistance program, has been improved to promote access and opportunity for low-and middle-income students. In 2006-07, our improvements will benefit 145,000 students by, for example, expanding upfront grants. In 2006-07, our government is expanding access to grant eligibility to include students from families with incomes of up to about $75,000. That translates to about twice as many grants as in 2005-06, with a total of 60,000 students expected to receive these access grants. The upfront tuition grants that used to be in existence in the province of Ontario were eliminated in about 1993. We started restoring them two years ago, with 32,000 students eligible. This year, it is 60,000.

We're also updating eligibility for student assistance by, for example, updating the book and supply allowance, which hadn't been updated in almost 20 years. Not only will students be able to access more student assistance -- it's risen from $9,300 to $11,900 for a single student -- they'll be able to do this without an increase in their annual maximum repayable debt. For example, if you borrow $7,500 through the OSAP program, you only have to repay $7,000 of it. The other $500 is automatically a grant. We've maintained the debt ceiling even though we've increased the amount of aid that students are eligible for by about 30%.

As announced in November, the McGuinty government has also created the Ontario trust for student support to help enhance post-secondary access. The government is making $50 million available every year to match private and corporate cash donations that are collected and used by colleges and universities to set up endowment funds. The interest from these endowment funds provides bursaries for students in need, and this source of support supplements the upfront grants and the other student assistance available and, of course, the other institutional aid that's available.

In addition to making sure students have the support they need to attend a post-secondary institution, we have created a sustainable, predictable, regulated tuition framework. For every extra $3 invested by the province, students are contributing one extra dollar. No institution may raise fees without participating in our new student access guarantee.

Let me just touch on that again. When we brought in the new tuition framework, we really recognized that everybody has to participate but, first and foremost, we need the government and the people of Ontario to invest more in post-secondary education. After making the investment and outlining it for the future, we asked students for a contribution. So the bottom line is that over the course of the plan, for every extra tuition dollar we're asking of students, we're asking the people of Ontario to invest an extra $3 in post-secondary education. That contrasts with the past, when the previous government, for every extra tuition dollar asked of students, took money out of the system; and the government before that, for every extra tuition dollar asked of students, put in 90 cents.

What's the student access guarantee? It formally enshrines the commitment to accessibility. It says that institutions cannot raise their fees unless they participate in the student access guarantee. It will ensure that no qualified Ontario student will be prevented from attending our publicly funded colleges and universities because of a lack of financial support programs. Students in need must have access to the resources they need for their tuition, books and mandatory fees.

One way we're promoting access is by working with institutions to increase enrolment, of course. This is part of our multi-year agreements, and I'll have more to say about those in a moment. I spoke about the enrolment increases: 86,000 more students this September than in 2002-03.

What about the access and opportunity strategy? Financing is not the only barrier to a post-secondary education. Some students may be diverted from realizing their dreams for other reasons. That's why, last year, the government committed $10 million, rising to $55 million by 2009-10, to help colleges and universities reach out to four key groups: francophones, people with disabilities, aboriginal students and first-generation students; that is, the first generation in their family to attend a post-secondary institution. The statistics are clear that if one of your parents went on to a post-secondary institution, you're two and a half times more likely to go on than if one of them didn't.

We've established advisory committees to help meet the needs of each community, to give us good front-line advice on how to increase participation and success in post-secondary institutions by people from these groups.

Through research, expansion of existing services and innovative pilot projects, we're providing better access and opportunity for groups traditionally under-represented in the post-secondary system.

This year, we're investing $5 million in programs run by colleges, universities and community organizations that will help potential first-generation students. These partners will encourage young people to pursue post-secondary education and apprenticeships by offering valuable information and advice, but they do more than that. They essentially provide a wraparound service, recognizing that students can face a number of challenges, not just financial, and that as those challenges arise, if they enrol in a post-secondary program, the challenges have to be addressed immediately; otherwise, the student is at great risk of not completing.

Location should not bar education. As we announced at the end of August, our government is investing $65.3 million in 2006-07, an increase of $20 million over just two years ago, to help small, northern and rural colleges provide high-quality programs in their communities. This way, students do not have to leave their communities to get a high-quality post-secondary education. These investments are expected to result in higher educational achievement, greater participation and improvements in academic retention, enrolment and graduation.

Meanwhile, our most remote communities have been ably served for many years by the Contact North/Contact Nord system. It was established in the late 1980s by the Peterson government. It was serving approximately 67 communities. This year, we made a $1.5-million investment to fund e-learning access centres in at least 20 new communities. In addition, the funding is enhancing the service in 12 additional northern communities so they can participate in the Contact North/Contact Nord videoconference network. Last year, Contact North helped deliver close to 13,000 course registrations in 589 credit courses. It offers courses from all of the northern colleges and universities, so from one location you can participate in them all.

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario will help us improve quality. It's the second pillar of our Reaching Higher plan. Making post-secondary education more accessible must be matched by a commitment to quality. It means more resources, more student time, more faculty, more innovative research.

The McGuinty government is committed to quality improvement and innovation and to making sure students' experiences are rewarding and successful. Already this year, we have announced operating grants that are about $700 million more than the 2004-05 base levels for colleges and universities, which will help to improve staffing, purchase additional educational resources and technology and improve student support services.

In 2005, legislation was passed creating the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario to ensure continued improvement of the post-secondary education system. This council will monitor and report on performance. It will also monitor and make recommendations on the student access guarantee I spoke about a few moments ago. It will undertake research on quality, participation and access and advise government on the best way to measure performance and institutional collaboration. It is an arm's-length agency and it will provide good research-based advice.

In May, I announced the nomination of the Honourable Frank Iacobucci, former justice of the Supreme Court of Canada and past interim president of the University of Toronto, as chair of HEQCO.

HEQCO is an independent body. Our government will make sure that work undertaken by it does not duplicate that of the ministry. We encourage all of our post-secondary education partners to support the council in its endeavours to ensure that our students have access to the best-quality post-secondary education.

The third pillar of the Reaching Higher plan is accountability. The McGuinty government is promoting accountability through multi-year agreements with Ontario's publicly funded colleges and universities. During the three years covered by these agreements, total post-secondary education operating grants will rise to $4.3 billion by 2008-09, an increase of $1 billion per year since the introduction of the Reaching Higher plan. The increase means we're sending $4 billion to colleges and universities this year, the highest amount ever. Because these are multi-year agreements, they give colleges and universities the stability they need to plan for the coming years and to produce results.

But these are agreements with a difference. They set targets for individual institutions for improving student access to education and the quality of the student experience. The agreements establish system-wide goals for improvements and specific results for each institution, such as:

-- higher overall enrolment;

-- hiring new faculty;

-- increasing student and faculty interaction;

-- improving the learning experience and teaching excellence, including better library resources, lab equipment and information technology; and

-- helping more students succeed at college and university so that they stay in school and graduate.

These agreements are, of course, evolving. This is the first time it's happened. They will evolve over time, but what's important is the signal we're sending. The people of Ontario are investing in colleges, universities and post-secondary education. We want to make sure that investment gets the results the people of Ontario expect and, indeed, the students expect.

Once we have increased access to post-secondary and to undergraduate post-secondary education, let's turn now to graduate education.

We, of course, have the double-cohort students, a large number of students going through who will be looking for graduate opportunities. We also have the needs of an emerging economy which requires more highly trained researchers, more highly trained workers, and much more knowledgeable and creative workers than ever before, so we need more M.A.s and Ph.D.s. We have to go beyond the needs of the double cohort. That's why our government is allocating new spaces and funding to each university to expand graduate studies in education by 12,000 full-time students by 2007-08 and 14,000 by 2009-10. The investments required to support this will total $220 million annually by 2009-10. This represents a 55% increase in graduate spaces over 2002-03.

Our plan is to build a foundation for innovation and research to ensure we can compete successfully in the global marketplace. By expanding graduate education, we develop the science and technology professionals and the innovative thinkers and researchers who will drive our economic competitiveness for the future.

I want to touch for a moment on the private career colleges legislation. The private career colleges legislation hadn't been amended in approximately 30 years, but of course, many private career colleges had been established, the number of students had increased, and the needs, demands and expectations of the marketplace had substantially changed.

The Ontario government proclaimed legislation this fall, September 18, to ensure protection for students attending private career colleges after the Legislature had passed the new Private Career Colleges Act. They play a key role in providing education and training as part of post-secondary education in Ontario.

The new Private Career Colleges Act, 2005, will protect students against financial loss, make sure their training can continue and provide more confidence that their training will prepare them for the workplace. These are very significant advances in legislation which will provide improvements in quality and significant protection for the students.

If I could turn now to skills and prosperity, we're committed to developing the most highly trained workforce in North America. We need to do that in order to ensure that the needs of businesses and the future of the economy are met and secure.

Last November, I signed two historic agreements on behalf of the government of Ontario. I signed them with the federal government: the labour market development agreement and the labour market partnership agreement. These two agreements strengthen our plan to transform training in the province of Ontario. We were the last province to be able to sign the labour market development agreement.

They enable the ministry to expand programs and labour market services in Ontario and deliver them in an efficient, streamlined manner. There will be more access to apprenticeships, more help for job seekers and more guidance for employers who want to train and build a skilled workforce.

In the 2004 budget, the McGuinty government announced that it will build an integrated training and employment system. Through this system, employers and job seekers can connect with the labour market, training programs and services provided by the Ontario government by phone, online or in person.

Employers and job seekers will be able to access or be referred to the services they need by the first government office or community-based organization they contact, eliminating frustrating running around and costly delays. It's essential, as I said before, that the system be more user-friendly.

Apprenticeship: For many people, our integrated training and employment system will be the conduit that connects them with apprenticeship.

We have the largest apprenticeship system in Canada. More than 70,000 apprentices are currently undergoing training in Ontario at various stages. That's the entire population of Sarnia. We have more than 20,000 employers employing these apprentices. Sixty-six classroom training providers, including 24 colleges of applied arts and technology, provide in-school training to more than 26,000 people every year.

But as high as these numbers sound, they aren't as high as we need them to be. Canada is facing a skills shortage. According to the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, 25,000 workers are needed immediately, and we'll need an estimated one million workers by 2020. That's from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce in September 2005.

We know that a skills-focused education pays off. Carpenters, plumbers and machinists can earn $30 an hour, plus benefits and more. Building a skilled workforce is one of the main elements of the McGuinty government's economic plan. We've committed to increasing the number of new apprenticeship registrations to 26,000 annually by 2007-08. I'm pleased to be able to report that we're firmly on our way to reaching that goal. In the 2005-06 year, 21,489, to be exact, registered in apprenticeship training, a number that exceeded the year's target. The number of new apprenticeship registrations received by the end of August 2006 puts the province on track to meet its target of 23,500 registrations in 2006-07, and to meet our annual registration goal of 26,000 in 2007-08. To continue our progress, the McGuinty government will invest more than $100 million in apprenticeship-related programming in 2006-07.

Here's a rundown on where we are with our suite of initiatives.

We've got the Ontario youth apprenticeship program, which encourages high school students to stay in school while learning a skilled trade. They can earn credits and learn the trade at the same time. In 2006-07, we are investing $8.25 million in OYAP, giving more than 20,000 students the opportunity to begin their knowledge of a trade.

The pre-apprenticeship training program provides individuals -- such as youth, aboriginal people, women and other under-represented groups -- the opportunity to upgrade trade-related skills so they can be eligible for an apprenticeship.

In July, we announced funding to support pre-apprenticeship training programs such as those through the James Bay Employment and Training Board, which prepare workers for work in the De Beers diamond mine.

There is much more. Since 2004, the government has invested $33.2 million in more than 2,500 co-op diploma apprenticeship spots, which give you not only the start of a trade but also a college diploma at the same time.

Classroom instruction is an essential part of the apprentice's training. This year, Ontario's $31-million investment will help more than 27,000 apprentices undertake the classroom portion of their training at 24 community colleges and 39 training centres.

We respect the important role that employers play in the apprenticeship system. We know that training apprentices is an investment, but we need more employers training apprentices. To encourage more, we have the apprenticeship training tax credit, a $95-million program that provides employers of apprentices with $5,000 a year -- up to $15,000 over three years -- if they hire and train an apprentice in a designated trade. It is a substantial encouragement to train. The Ministry of Finance, which administers the program, is collecting data on the number of claims made under the tax credit.

If I could just touch on a couple of other areas, we have the Job Connect program, which brings in and connects job seekers, or those who seek an improvement in employment status, with everything from counselling to academic upgrading to apprenticeship opportunities to employment opportunities. It's an essential program. We've expanded it. It serves almost 200,000 people every year, adults and young people. We've put another $10 million into it for 2006-07, which brings the total to $127 million.

As I say, these services are essential. They also connect Ontarians to other services such as bridge training programs for the internationally trained, language assessment and training, apprenticeship training, and even high school and post-secondary training programs.

Literacy has been in the news a lot lately. We are at substantial investments in literacy: $69 million for this year, including $10 million in academic upgrading, which will ensure that 4,000 students are able to improve and increase their academic standing so that they can go on to better opportunities.

In short, knowledge and skills: These are the drivers for the economy of the future. These are the drivers that will ensure that Ontarians have the broadest range of opportunities that individuals may wish for. Collectively, these are the drivers that will ensure that the province of Ontario can reach its potential.