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| Ontario | 32e | 3e | Discours sur l’éducation | 11 octobre 1983 | Bette Stephenson | Minister of Education | Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario |

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to introduce the financial estimates for the Ministry of Education for the 1983-84 fiscal year.

Traditionally, this has been an opportunity to review significant achievements of the past year, and I am pleased to tell you that there are many accomplishments to which I might refer with great pride. I propose, however, instead of undertaking a comprehensive review, to look to the future and to focus these remarks on a few large issues that I believe merit discussion and attention in these estimates debates.

Several experiences this past year have reinforced my concern about the increasing breakdown of social consensus and the rise of narrow group interests. I regret that we are seeing too often today, in matters affecting the schools in particular, a proliferation of vocal interest groups, which has the unfortunate consequence of eroding the whole and threatening seriously to fragment society. I am speaking of the politics of assertion where narrow, vested interests create a state of disunity and attempt to promote the illusion that at any given time on any given issue a local and well-organized minority is, in fact, a majority.

It makes doing the right thing, as perceived by an accommodating and tolerant majority, difficult to attempt and at times impossible to accomplish. This problem of fragmentation within us and in our society is a very difficult one and potentially, I think, dangerous.

If it continues to grow, I believe we face the very real possibility of becoming a nation of self-interest groups, living separately and apart in suspicion of each other and without a collective vision of where we should be going as a whole society.

In this context I think it is important and necessary to reaffirm the general merit and the value of a universally accessible, publicly supported school system, a system that I believe contributes to consensus and is a countervailing force against social fragmentation.

In a pluralistic society such as ours, which can be characterized as multicultural, multiracial and multilingual, a shared educational experience is important in fostering a common culture. Unity through shared experiences can be a countervailing force to factors, which split and fragment society. Indeed, the school system may well be the only common, non-commercial learning and socializing experience for our young people.

The school in the future may well become the true community focal point as we perceive more clearly the need for increased co-operation between school boards and social and health agencies. Through a strong, publicly supported school system we can provide such mutual experiences and work towards the objectives of imparting those moral and ethical values upon which our very society is based.

As has been said many times, we live in an era in which change is the constant. The nature of unanticipated change calls for a set of widely accepted societal understandings if change is to be productive rather than threatening. There is a need for a united, purposeful vision of where we should be going.

A strong, healthy, publicly supported school system such as ours can provide those essential educational experiences, which are needed to foster unity enriched by diversity. Recognition of the importance of shared educational experience provides the rationale for a re-emphasis on a core curriculum within our schools, for more mandatory courses for students in our secondary schools, for more prescriptive provincial curriculum guidelines, which set out the limits for courses that may be developed at the local level.

The belief that our schools can and should provide common societal understandings by which change can be managed in the interest of society at large underlies the changes in the secondary school program, which I announced last November with the release of the policy statement, The Renewal of Secondary Education in Ontario. At that time I stated that all students entering secondary school in September 1984 would work towards a single diploma, the Ontario secondary school diploma, or OSSD, which will replace the current two diplomas normally earned at the end of grade 12 and grade 13.

A new policy circular called Ontario Schools: Intermediate/Senior Divisions, or OSIS, was released on October 3 and sets forth the details governing the requirements for the earning of the OSSD. Such requirements have been designed to permit motivated and competent students to earn that diploma and to satisfy, at the same time, university admission requirements within a four-year program.

There is, however, no intention at all to force all university-bound students to complete secondary school within four years. For many students it will be appropriate to take a longer period of time and a wider range of subjects. However, the current grade 13 program will be converted to a set of prescriptive, provincially designed, Ontario academic courses which will provide common university entrance courses right across the province.

There will be a substantial increase in the number of compulsory credit courses required for the Ontario secondary school diploma. To earn a diploma, students must complete six language credits, four credits in mathematics and science, three credits in the social sciences, which include Canadian geography and history, and one credit each in the arts, physical and health education and business or technological studies.

There will, at the same time, be flexibility in the application of these requirements for those students who may need a limited number of course substitutions in order to qualify for the diploma and to suit their best interests.

A certificate of education will be available for students who earn a minimum of 14 credits, including six compulsory credits, but are unable to complete their studies for the diploma. The Ontario student transcript with common course coding will provide consistent information from school to school right across the province and thus improve communication between the school and post-secondary institutions and between the school and employers.

Renewed emphasis will be placed on the preparation of young people for the world of employment. Employability skills and career awareness will be given high priority in the intermediate and senior programs. This will require better communication and greater co-operation between the schools and the community at large, a community which includes parents, members of the general public, industry, business and labour, in order to develop creative and productive links between the school system and the society in which the schools play a vital role.

In order to support these changes, several important curriculum development projects have been initiated, with particular emphasis placed on the development of general level and basic level courses for grades 9 to 12. We are at this point in the early stages of producing this new curriculum, and its full impact will not be felt until the second half of the 1980s and well into the 1990s.

In addition, the ministry is developing Schools General, a publication which will bring together existing curriculum policy at all levels of the public educational system. It will provide the foundation for the planning of curriculum in the school systems and will be helpful to persons who wish to clarify and deepen their understanding of Ontario's schools.

This curriculum policy is based on the belief that public education in this province should serve the needs of the greatest number of young people. Our initiatives, however, have in no way excluded the needs of exceptional pupils or those who do not fit into the mould of the majority.

In fact, I can say that in 1983 we have moved significantly closer to the elusive reality of providing equality of educational opportunity for all of our children in Ontario.

Putting the principle of equality of educational opportunity into practice, however, is no easy task in a province as large and as diverse as this province is. It involves thorny issues and problems of resources, local and regional disparities, distance, isolation, language, as well as social fragmentation, which I have already described.

I would like to tell you about several initiatives which I believe help us move closer to the goal of equality of educational opportunity and the first is in the area of French language education.

On March 29 we announced that the government is proposing to provide every French-speaking child in the province with the right to a French language education. French-speaking pupils would have the right to receive education in their own language in classes or schools in the board of which the pupil is a resident or through services purchased by that board from another school board. A board purchasing such service would ensure access to the classes by providing daily transportation or the services in lieu of daily transportation.

Where an English-speaking pupil is in a minority situation, these same rights would apply for that pupil. The provision of education in the appropriate language of instruction would no longer be a matter of "where numbers warrant."

There are more than 90,000 students in this province currently receiving their instruction in the French language in Ontario's public elementary and secondary schools. The proposal announced will affect only about 1,000 French-speaking students who are not receiving instruction in French.

I estimate that this initiative will cost about $1 million to implement since all of those students are already within the school system and already being funded. That additional $1 million, I think, should be viewed in the context of the total cost of public education in the province this year, which is close to $6 billion.

It is also proposed that the governance of schools offering the minority language programs would be, in large measure, under the exclusive jurisdiction of a minority language section of a board of education. This provision would apply to some 19 boards of education where the minority language enrolment would be 500 or more pupils or represent 10 per cent or more of the board's enrolment. This section of the board would be comprised of trustees who speak the minority language and who would be elected by minority language electors. The proposal stated that these sections would be added to the boards of education in time for the municipal elections in 1985.

Spokesmen for the separate schools have expressed a sympathetic reaction to the general intention of this proposal and are at the present time discussing the possibilities of achieving some means of providing for francophone representation in a way which is acceptable to the separate school boards of this province. I hope this will lead to, and indeed I have asked for, an indication from the Ontario Separate School Trustees Association as to the basis upon which it may be possible to accommodate the aspirations of French-speaking citizens who support Roman Catholic separate schools.

Finally, within the proposal, it was proposed that the Minister of Education be empowered to take appropriate action when a school board does not accept the recommendations of the Languages of Instruction Commission of Ontario.

Ministry officials in each region have met with representatives of school boards affected by the proposal to explain its objectives, the way in which it would operate and other matters.

Input from the field has been received since the release of the proposal. To date, the Ministry of Education has received 165 letters from individuals, 18 resolutions from counties, regions and municipalities, three petitions from groups, four reactions from noneducational organizations, and 19 official positions from boards and educational associations.

A second initiative towards equality of educational opportunity, one that may very well prove to be the most significant of all in this direction, will be in the introduction of the educational microcomputer in Ontario schools. As you know, personal computers are now in wide use in our schools. However, the computers were not specifically designed for educational use. We believe that their specifications and software will prove inappropriate, incompatible and inadequate for Ontario's educational needs in the future.

As a result, the government has decided to invest $15 million in an industrial and educational strategy - both in hardware and software that will place Canadian-made microcomputers in every classroom in the province by the end of the decade.

I am pleased to inform you that the first prototype computers, now named Icon have been delivered to the ministry. The initial machines have been evaluated and approval has been granted for further testing this fall in a number of schools across the province.

The Icon is designed to meet a carefully considered set of functional requirements. It has vastly greater computing ability so that sophisticated learning experiences become possible, but it also has the capacity and capability to network, offering the potential to provide bridges between pupils and teachers in classrooms, between schools and even between boards right across the province.

In terms of hardware, we have determined that the educational market in this province will grow to be worth about $100 million through the year 1988. We decided that rather than subsidize or provide direct grants to a private company, we would purchase prototypes and guarantee the purchase of microcomputers meeting the functional requirements for delivery to the schools.

In this way the private sector is providing the innovation, the equity capital, the risk and the management of the project, while the government is providing market entry support on delivery of an acceptable product. As a very positive incentive, the government will offer special grant assistance of up to 75 per cent of the cost to help school boards acquire the new microcomputers.

While I have a great interest in the machine itself, I am even more interested in the software that will bring computer education into Ontario's classrooms. Quality education software, authored and produced right here in Ontario, is, I believe, essential if our students are to derive the maximum benefit from the emerging information and knowledge technologies. This initiative will ensure that the schools will be provided with quality software, which will be consistent with the curriculum guidelines of the Ministry of Education.

I believe that the need for educational software designed to our requirements can be best met if a domestic educational software industry comes into being that unites the talents of teachers, programmers and private entrepreneurs. This approach to the new electronic medium will be consistent with the approach that provides funds for the production and purchase of traditional textbooks and will provide the impetus and the focal points to encourage a Canadian educational software industry.

In my view, the microcomputer is a tool that has the potential to help us to take a giant step towards providing equality of educational opportunity in Ontario, a principle and an objective which should be pursued vigorously for all components of public education in all parts of the province.

The disparities between those that have a rich tax base and those that have a poor tax base are much more noticeable in small isolated communities in the north. These communities have special problems and special needs, and it was to address those needs that I appointed the Commission of Inquiry Regarding Small Secondary Schools in Northern Ontario in May, 1982. Members may recall that the commission was established because of questions raised concerning the viability of one particular small secondary school, but it was clear at that time that similar problems would likely arise in other communities.

The inquiry, therefore, reviewed the financing of small secondary schools in northern Ontario, the support services available for secondary schools in northern Ontario and the governance of education in northern Ontario. The commissioner, Mr. Rodger Allan, met with the school boards, with groups of concerned citizens and with teachers and visited secondary schools across the north in the course of his inquiry. I am especially pleased with the report because of the breadth of the issues that it has addressed and the sensitivity, which Mr. Allan brought to the task.

Many of the recommendations are addressed to the school boards for consideration, but those recommendations for Ministry of Education action are under active study. Boards, groups and people who wish to comment on the report have forwarded their reactions through the ministry's regional offices and their views are being considered as we formulate our response to the recommendations in the report. I expect to be able to comment more fully on these within the next few weeks.

On several occasions during the past few years I have had the opportunity to express to school board officials and members of the educational community my belief in the importance of equity in educational finance in this province. The underlying principle that there shall be equal educational opportunity with an equitable tax burden continues to be foremost, particularly in an economic climate characterized by rising costs and declining revenues at both the provincial and the local levels.

The Report of the Commission on Declining School Enrolment, chaired by the late Dr. Robert Jackson, included the following recommendation: "All industrial and commercial properties be assessed and taxed for school purposes directly by the province, and be exempted from school-related municipal taxation; there be one school-related industrial commercial rate for the province; the proceeds of this tax be applied solely to the support of elementary (separate and public) and secondary education in the province as part of the equalization formula applicable to general legislative grants."

In June 1980 the ministry response to the recommendations of the commission in Issues and Directions indicated that the ministry had begun the internal exploration of alternative funding plans. Among the issues studied by the ministry were two examined in detail.

The first dealt with the assessment equalization factors which are published annually by the Ministry of Revenue and their use by the Ministry of Education for education purposes on a long-term basis. We believe the tax burden for similarly recognized levels of expenditure should be equal on residences of equal value throughout the province. With this in view, the ministry has attempted to isolate those aspects of the published factors that would best achieve equity of tax burden on residential properties.

The second aspect of the ministry exploration dealt with the matter of industrial and commercial assessment. There was the view that since business and industry derives a significant portion of their revenues from residents in other municipalities, then the revenues from this assessment should perhaps be shared by all school boards across the province.

The model that was developed by my staff attempted to address the above-identified issues in the context of the underlying principle of equal educational opportunity with an equitable tax burden. The model, one of several explored by my staff, was shared and discussed with school boards across the province in the summer and fall of 1982. Initial reactions to the underlying principle of equal educational opportunity with an equitable tax burden. The model, one of several explored by my staff, was shared and discussed with school boards across the province in the summer and fall of 1982. Initial reactions to the model were varied, both in support of and opposed to the proposals. As I have indicated on other occasions, this model is not a definite plan, but simply the pursuit of a commitment made in 1980.

As a result of all of the discussions with the boards, I have asked the Advisory Committee on Financing Elementary and Secondary Education to assume the task of reviewing the model, as well as exploring and developing other alternative methods of funding education.

That advisory committee, as members may know, is comprised of 18 members representing each of the major educational constituencies in Ontario. It meets regularly on a monthly basis and has begun to meet specifically on this task. The committee has sent out invitations to all the major organizations to submit written briefs to the committee by October 1, 1983, and it is my understanding that the response has been most encouraging.

I anticipate that the committee will forward its findings and recommendations to me in due course. At this time I should like to assure you that the Ministry of Education will continue to consult with all of those bodies concerned with the delivery of educational programs in this province.

During the 1983 fall session of the Legislature the government intends to introduce amendments to the Teachers' Superannuation Act. Many of the changes that are being proposed will update provisions which have not changed substantially since they were first implemented in 1917, while other changes will address issues and problems and inequities which have emerged since the last amendment to the act in 1975.

Most of the proposed amendments result from recommendations put forward by the Premier's joint committee on teachers' superannuation in December 1981. After 14 months of ongoing discussions by the joint committee, composed of representatives from the government of Ontario and the Ontario Teachers' Federation, and after additional discussion between government and the teachers' representatives, 29 amendments are recommended to address the issues of declining enrolment, pension formula inequities, benefit improvements, interest rate returns and administrative efficiencies.

As well, several other changes to the act and the regulations are being proposed to bring the Teachers' Superannuation Act and the regulations thereunder in line with other legislation, including the Pension Benefits Act and the Family Law Reform Act.

The proposed amendments take into consideration the recommendations of the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Pensions in Ontario and reflect the general pension policy trends in both the private and the public sector. The changes will update the Teachers' Superannuation Act and the regulations to reflect a modern, equitable and workable pension policy for the educators of the province and, at the same time, offset some of the negative effects that declining enrolment has had upon the profession.

I would like to conclude with some comments on a major policy initiative that we are actively pursuing, which would involve in a significant way the teaching profession in Ontario, the way in which the teaching profession in this province is governed.

Plans are being developed for the establishment of a college of teachers-or it may have some other name-a formally recognized professional body with the authority to govern the preparation, the licensing and the registration of teachers in Ontario. This body would establish and maintain professional and ethical standards and be responsible for discipline within the profession.

I am taking this initiative because I have every confidence that the teaching profession has a status comparable to other established professions and I am confident that the public interest can be safeguarded by means other than the direct involvement of government in this matter.

In keeping with the principles enunciated by Chief Justice McRuer, this college would be an entirely separate entity from the existing teachers' federation and other professional organizations. It would have public representation on its governing body and a statutory base independent of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Colleges and Universities. There would be a single college representing all English and French elementary and secondary school teachers.

The college of teachers would be governed by a council separate from the Ontario Teachers' Federation, as I noted, and membership in the federation would net be a prerequisite for membership in the college. It is proposed that the governing council be composed of 26 members, six appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council representing the general public, two elected by the professional staff of faculties of education and 18 teachers elected directly by the teachers on a geographic basis.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to make this brief overview as an opening statement. I have really described only a few of the activities of the Ministry of Education, but I believe those I have outlined are central to this government's ongoing pursuit of equality of educational opportunity for all children and young people in Ontario.

The moneys we spend on education in Ontario are, I believe, well spent on a publicly supported education system that is second to none. We recognize that it is the ultimate concern of each of us and of all of us that our youth continue to enjoy the benefits of an education system of the highest possible quality that human resourcefulness can provide.