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| Ontario | 35e | 3e | Discours sur l’éducation | 16 novembre 1993 | David S. Cooke | Minister of Education and Training | Ontario New Democratic Party |

Thank you, Mr Chair. I'll make a few -- these aren't, I guess, like the old days when I was in opposition, when opening statements were about two hours for each party, but I have a few minutes and then I gather we'll have leadoffs from the Liberal Party today and some opportunity to have an exchange.

Mr Chair and members of the estimates committee, I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to discuss our new ministry and its commitment to the lifelong learning culture for our province. And while we're here to talk dollars and cents, it makes sense to also discuss the future of education and training.

I want to touch briefly on where education and training fits on the public agenda, describe our own efforts to develop a new ministry of lifelong learning and then briefly present some key ministry initiatives required for our quest for a culture of learning.

It's no secret that the education and training system is under intense public scrutiny today. This is due in large part to the tremendous change that is going on in our world, in the economy, in society, in family life.

The public expects that the system will prepare students to thrive as individuals, to participate successfully in our rapidly changing world. People expect the education that students receive will help them develop the work skills and the personal characteristics they will need to contribute to the economic and social wellbeing of this province. They look to the training community to provide them with the skills needed in the new workplace.

Since becoming Minister of Education and Training last February, I have talked with many people, young people and adults, in communities throughout the province. I have been struck by their passion when they told me that the education and training system must be more responsive to them.

They told me loudly and clearly that the system needs to change. At the same time, I believe there is a great deal to commend the system for. We have talented, dedicated educators who are on the front lines of coping with the enormous changes in our society and providing high-quality education.

Education and training has a vital role to play in this government's plan for economic renewal. Accessible training, retraining and an education relevant to our times are essential elements to ensure the full participation of all Ontarians in a productive, healthy and successful economy.

I envision a system of seamless, lifelong learning opportunities from junior kindergarten beyond college and university to the workplace, and those learning opportunities will be accessible to all. I envision a system that places the lifelong learner at the centre of everything we do.

The Ministry of Education and Training is responding in practical and innovative ways to meet the needs of all our partners.

For instance, there has been public concern that students, parents and employers did not know how well our students were learning and whether they were learning what is needed to keep Ontario successful. We have established a wide-ranging examination of the elementary and secondary education system through the Royal Commission on Learning. Even while the commission is doing its work, however, we have instituted a number of changes that affect what is taught in our schools and how it is taught.

We are in the process of developing clear standards of quality and systems of measuring the results achieved by students. A foundation of this new commitment to accountability is The Common Curriculum. It is being implemented, but we are getting input from teachers on ways to refine the common curriculum.

The ministry must receive input and advice from external stakeholders on many aspects of our initiatives. However, with the integration of three former ministries into one -- Colleges and Universities, Skills Development and Education -- it was clear that we needed to review and streamline the advisory agencies and committees system.

We now have a committee at work streamlining our stakeholder advisory system with a view to improving efficiency and policy advice. Our aim is to reduce the number of advisory committees through consolidation and the elimination of redundant groups.

The activities of the Ministry of Education and Training encompass all aspects of lifelong learning. For instance, we are moving ahead with our belief in prior learning assessment, the notion that what people have already done or learned must count in their education. We have also established an innovative agency, the Ontario Training and Adjustment Board, to lead the development of a highly skilled workforce in Ontario.

I'll talk more about these initiatives later, but first a few words about our own backyard.

My deputy minister and I were given a mandate to develop a new ministry, to innovate, to get beyond the superministries of the past which kept in place the hardening of categories that has made lifelong learning policy and program development difficult. In my view, it is important and necessary to consolidate the former ministries with OTAB and the Jobs Ontario Training initiatives in a new ministry.

We are well on our way to achieving our goal: a ministry which has the capability to work with partners across the learning sectors while retaining sector-specific expertise. We are grateful to the many partners who have contributed ideas as part of the shaping of our new organization.

We have high hopes for our new ministry. We want it to be responsive and efficient and to become a model of learning organization. We want to set an example by the manner in which we learn from working with many educational partners in the province. Two basic principles, accountability and equity, guide most of our policy initiatives in the restructuring of the ministry.

I'd now like to move to begin the discussion of our work in each of these areas.

Without a strong accountability framework, we might as well close up the shop and go home.

We cannot meet the needs of our learners without being accountable to them and to the public. We need to be clear about outcomes and purposes, how we're doing in achieving them, and presenting accessible information about our progress in implementing change where it is needed.

The Royal Commission on Learning has a key role to play in the ministry's attempts to shape an education system that is accountable to the people who support it and use it. This is the most far-ranging examination of our elementary and secondary system in more than 25 years.

The commission has a mandate to examine elementary and secondary school programs, teacher education, the organization of the school system and accountability in education. This is a major undertaking but one that is crucial if Ontario is to continue to enjoy a reputation of providing quality education to meet the changing needs of its citizens. To carry out this important review of education, we sought out and were successful in finding five people with a broad range of personal and educational experiences, with a knowledge of our system and with a passion to make the school system work better and serve the needs of our diverse population. We will have the commission's report and recommendations by the end of 1994.

Among the strongest voices calling for a more accountable education system are those of parents. I believe that to be truly accountable, the ministry must reach out to parents in a more meaningful way. We must inform them, listen to their views and involve them in the decision-making process. That is why I announced the establishment of the Ontario Parent Council, with 18 members representing parents in all areas of the province.

There has been intense interest in the parent council. We've received more than 1,000 applications. This advisory council will not speak for any single interest group, but will represent the views of all parents.

I expect the council to address specific issues of interest to it. I anticipate that there will be times when I will ask the council for its views on policies or initiatives that the ministry is considering. I look forward to this kind of input from parents.

Shortly after I became minister, I went on the road to listen to the public in a series of open forums in six centres throughout the province. I heard their concerns, their views and their suggestions. Much of what I heard led to the kinds of initiatives I am talking about here today.

It became clear that we had to change the way business has been done at the ministry. We must tear down some walls. We must become more open. We must share information and power more effectively and we must listen to our partners.

As part of our outreach, we have produced a number of publications to help the public to be informed. We have attempted to present these publications in a way that is clear and concise, in a way that cuts through the educational jargon or edubabble. For instance, we translated The Common Curriculum into plain language and made a commitment that all future ministry documents will be written in a language that people can understand.

This September, we produced the Back To School Report, a paper which informed parents of initiatives and directions in the elementary and secondary school systems. I should tell you that this particular document was co-produced by the Ontario Teachers' Federation, the ministry and the trustees' organizations, and all three signed off before the document went out.

We received about 5,000 responses to the mail-back coupon requesting specific ministry publications and reports, more proof that there is a strong public desire for information.

In addition to these publications, the ministry has put considerable emphasis on consultation on a wide range of issues. We have had considerable success in getting feedback through meetings with stakeholders concerning initiatives in special education, French language, grade 9 testing, junior kindergarten, anti-racism, university accountability and post-secondary harassment and discrimination policies.

The feedback I've received from parents since I became Minister of Education and Training has been very strong and very clear. They want to know what is being taught and how well their child is learning.

In response to this need and following extensive province-wide consultation, we have introduced the Common Curriculum. It sets out what students are expected to know at key points in their schooling: grades 3, 6 and 9. Built into the Common Curriculum are standards by which to measure what students have learned as a result of their school experiences.

There are accountability measures built into the Common Curriculum, and it therefore establishes expectations for all students. We are also currently engaged in a continual evaluation of the Common Curriculum to ensure its clarity, breadth and depth. The Common Curriculum is designed for all students in grades 1 to 9 and it means that in grade 9 there will no longer be a different program for students of different abilities.

I should also indicate that the Common Curriculum document will be rewritten this fall, reflecting input and experience with the document up to this point. There were some comments initially that the document wasn't specific enough, that there needed to be some changes. That consultation process is going on now and we expect to reissue the document at the end of 1994.

Destreaming was probably the most controversial initiative we have implemented this year. As of this September, all boards except for a very few have stopped the practice of streaming grade 9 students into courses based on levels of difficulty: basic, general or advanced. We believe it was the right thing to do because we found that too many students from poor families or ethnocultural minority backgrounds were being streamed into basic courses of study in grade 9. Too often, students were put into basic or general levels because of reasons other than their ability. The introduction of the Common Curriculum plays a large role in ensuring that there are measurable standards of achievement for students in grade 9.

Another important ministry initiative also affects grade 9 students: universal reading and writing tests. Many grade 9 students in the province have just finished writing the tests, the results of which will count towards their final mark. By the end of the school year, every grade 9 student will have taken the tests.

The results of these tests will provide important information about the learning success of individual students and about education in general in Ontario. They will also give parents and students a clear picture of how well grade 9 students read and write and how well the education system is meeting expectations. We will use this information to determine how changes to the system can be strengthened to meet the changing needs of Ontario students.

During my term as chair of the Council of Ministers of Education this past year, all provinces agreed that the school achievement indicators program of testing math, reading and writing will continue and, by 1995, will be expanded to include science.

The province will also participate in the third International Mathematics and Science Study tests scheduled for May of 1995, with reports expected the following year. These international tests examine the education systems, including teaching practices and curricula, of Canadian provinces and other countries.

As I said earlier, we are focusing on accountability at all levels of learning. This year saw the establishment of the College Standards and Accreditation Council, which will develop consistent standards for all college programs. The council has the authority to define credentials, set standards and review and accredit publicly funded college programs. The council represents a significant step forward in ensuring all programs offered by Ontario colleges provide the vocational and life skills needed by students.

At the university level, last June I released the Task Force on University Accountability. I believe the task force's recommendations are a good starting point for developing a framework making Ontario's universities more accountable to government and the public. We have just received comments on those recommendations from the stakeholders and we will be developing an action plan for university accountability in the new year.

Learners come in all sizes and ages, all levels of intellectual and physical ability and many racial and ethnocultural backgrounds. They must have access to educational and training opportunities. Our schools, colleges, universities and the Ontario Training and Adjustment Board have to be open and accountable to the people they serve. They must be grounded in principles of equity, fairness and accessibility.

I'm particularly proud of the work my ministry has done in implementing the recommendations of the Stephen Lewis report. Recently, we appointed an assistant deputy minister to lead the anti-racism, equity and access division, whose influence will be felt both within and outside the ministry. This assistant deputy minister will guide the ministry in incorporating anti-racist policy in the ministry, school boards and post-secondary institutions and in curriculum development.

This division will ensure that all school boards develop and implement approved anti-racism and ethnocultural equity policies. By September 1995, all boards that have not done so must begin to implement their policies. The ministry has provided a number of resource documents to school boards to help them develop their policies, and ministry staff are available to help as well.

Last spring, a series of anti-racism round tables involving local school boards was held throughout the province. These round tables also included a variety of people from the community, from business and from the ministry.

The Jobs Ontario Youth program, under the leadership of my colleague Zanana Akande, was a tremendous success in finding summer jobs for minority young people who have been particularly hard hit by the recession.

Recently, I released guidelines to help colleges and universities review their policies to address harassment and discrimination. These policies cover all employees, students, members of boards, members of standing and ad hoc committees and all institution-sponsored activities, both on and off campus. The clear message is that we will not tolerate harassment and discrimination at our colleges and universities.

We have also issued guidelines indicating that board members of post-secondary institutions should reflect the diversity of their communities.

In this regard, we are also taking steps to see that the teachers of this province reflect the social diversity as well. We are reviewing admission requirements to faculties of education to ensure that qualified racial minority candidates are attracted to and enrolled in these programs.

We have addressed equity and access issues at the other end of the school system as well by moving ahead with the provision of junior kindergarten. The ministry recognizes that the early years of a child's life are pivotal in their intellectual and social growth. Half-day junior kindergarten will provide youngsters with the opportunities for a head start in developing their language, social and physical skills.

Bill 4, which received royal assent last July, requires school boards to establish junior kindergartens by September 1994. However, the ministry recognizes that some boards may have difficulty achieving this goal because of current economic conditions. So we have permitted boards to phase in the program over a three-year period. Full implementation means that a school board must provide a program for all pupils in its area whose parents choose to enroll them in junior kindergarten. Some boards have also come up with alternative programs that we have approved.

Another area in which equity and access play an important role is in the policies around education of exceptional students. We believe that, wherever possible, the educational needs of exceptional students should be met within their local schools. Research has shown that most children benefit from this approach to learning.

The ministry is currently developing new directions on the integration of exceptional students into regular classrooms. We have held a number of meetings with stakeholders and are now considering their views as we further refine policy directions.

However, the ministry recognizes that there are some students whose needs can be met more appropriately in alternative settings such as self-contained classes, provincial schools or residential demonstration schools. Options for future directions of provincial and demonstration schools are currently being reviewed by a special provincial schools project team in consultation with stakeholders.

This evaluation of the schools will ensure they are appropriately organized, managed and funded to deliver high-quality, cost-effective programs which meet the special needs of students. The project team is continuing public consultation, and we hope to establish clear direction by next June.

An issue that's very much connected to equity and access is violence in our schools. Students must have a learning environment free of the fear of violence. We've all read the newspapers and heard stories on the news. Recently, the deputy minister sent a directive to all school boards that when serious incidents of violence occur they must call in the police, report to the police.

We will be moving ahead to give clearer direction to school boards about violence prevention measures. But the bottom line is that schools must observe the principle of zero tolerance of violence.

The ministry's violence prevention secretariat is also consulting with teachers, parents, students and others in the community to find workable solutions to dealing with violence in its many forms.

Those in less populated and isolated areas of the province have the same right to high-quality education and training as those in our urban areas. In 1991, the ministry established the northern education project to examine the needs of small school boards in northern Ontario.

A draft final report with 40 proposals intended to ensure access and equity for northern residents was released to the public and given to the royal commission in time for its hearings in the north. The final edited report will be ready soon.

This year I also announced the implementation of the prior learning assessment initiative, which reflects my belief that what a learner has already accomplished or learned should count for something. As of this September, a comprehensive plan for granting of credit for experience and prior learning is being phased into the college system. This recognition of prior learning is very much in keeping with our philosophy of lifelong learning. It is expected that this initiative will make colleges more accessible to underrepresented groups.

The francophone population of Ontario has not had good access to the college system. Too many young francophones were not continuing their education because of lack of accessibility and culturally sensitive facilities. I was pleased therefore to be able to announce recently the establishment of two new French-language colleges and a permanent campus in Ottawa for the already established and successful Cité collégiale. These are to be open for business by September 1995.

One of the new colleges will be located in the Sudbury area, with satellite campuses throughout northern Ontario. The second college will serve the south-central part of the province. It will be a college without walls, using satellites and other distance education technology to deliver its programs. The new college will make use of existing classroom spaces in schools, colleges and cultural centres.

The college without walls concept is an example of partnership at work. We cannot accomplish what we need to without the help of many partners in education: students, parents, teachers, business and labour, community groups and other government ministries and agencies.

A unique example of partnership at work is the "culture of change" initiative between the ministry and the Ontario Teachers' Federation. This initiative in partnership came about because of the concern of many teachers about their ability to implement change at the rate it was needed. It was clear that if we expected teachers to implement initiatives such as destreaming and the Common Curriculum, we had a responsibility to help them in a practical way. So the ministry provided financial support for this professional development project.

Among other things, it set up an electronic communications network for teachers across the province to share ideas and information on implementing change in education. Initially, the target was to get 1,000 teachers using the system. In fact, there are 2,000 teachers sharing resources, ideas and their creativity.

Many of our partnership initiatives involve training and job-creation programs. One of the ministry's most successful programs in the high schools is the school workplace apprenticeship program, where students earn their high school diplomas while earning money in apprenticeship opportunities. Obviously, without the partnerships of employers, this program would not exist.

Our school work programs continue to show yearly increases in the number of students enrolled in them. Last year, for instance, almost 66,000 students took part in co-op education programs, an increase of 8% over the previous year.

The ministry has also established a new program: education-work connections project. This program has two main functions: to help students in the transition from school to the workplace and to keep kids in school longer. The partners in this initiative involve schools, employers and community groups.

The school-colleges linkages project will help to improve the transition of students from school to college. The results of this project will mean that more students are better prepared for college and therefore more successful. It means that fewer students will drop out before completing college. The project will also foster better cost-efficiencies by helping colleges develop plans for sharing facilities, faculties and eliminating duplication of courses.

This year saw the completion of the work of the Task Force on Advanced Training. Its report, called No Dead Ends, is a follow-up to the Vision 2000 project and makes a number of recommendations to ease student transfers from one type of post-secondary institution to another. The report provides a challenge to the post-secondary system to be more imaginative in crossing institutional boundaries to develop even more useful and appropriate programs of study. This is the kind of innovation necessary to build a more successful education and training system in an era of constrained resources. We are in the process of evaluating our specific actions in this regard.

The Ontario Training and Adjustment Board, OTAB, is perhaps the best example of innovation in partnership and power sharing. OTAB is an agency that will facilitate access to training and adjustment services for those who are laid off or facing layoff, for young people seeking to enter the job market and for others trying to re-enter the workforce. It will help individuals and communities adjust to the changes in technology, global trade relationships, competition and of course economic restructuring. It will lead the development of a highly skilled workforce in Ontario.

OTAB meets the very real needs to consolidate government programs, to eliminate duplication of services and to fill and identify gaps in the system. OTAB will also expand and revitalize the role for apprenticeships that link school with the workplace. It will evaluate and redesign training programs to ensure they are meeting the needs of Ontarians now and in the future.

It is being managed by those who know the system best. The partnerships represented on OTAB's board of directors include business, labour, women, racial minorities, people with disabilities, francophones and educator-trainers. A seat has been reserved for aboriginal people, should they choose to participate.

OTAB and the Jobs Ontario Training initiative are key elements of the government's strategy for economic recovery. Jobs Ontario Training is a three-year government strategy for getting long-term unemployed people back to work. Like OTAB, it depends on partnerships for success, with employers, with participants and with those who deliver the program to both: the community agencies, known as brokers.

Jobs Ontario Training offers opportunities that no previous government program has been able to deliver, training opportunities and long-term jobs; real jobs for real people. It's a practical way of ensuring that those who lost the most ground during the recession don't get left behind in the recovery.

In the 14 months since the program became operational, 32,600 jobs have been created and 22,000 filled. That's 22,000 unemployed people who now have jobs, who probably would not have jobs without this program. Our latest information shows that 45% of the Jobs Ontario Training participants were previously on social assistance, and the remaining 55% had run out of unemployment insurance benefits or were not eligible for unemployment insurance; 85% of the jobs are skilled occupations that require a minimum of high school. The average wage is $21,000 a year.

Jobs Ontario Training has the highest standards of accountability, through a system of staff auditing and monitoring procedures. For instance, Jobs Ontario staff monitor the brokers' funding needs and ensure that they have money to meet their commitments without building up a surplus. Staff also have random visits to brokers to inspect the books and to make sure the participants are in fact working and being trained. To manage our cash flow more closely, we have also reduced the three-month advance payments to brokers to two months. We are also working with brokers to manage their cash flow to employers.

Jobs Ontario Training offers hope to workers, concrete help to employers and a minimum savings this year alone in government social assistance payments of $135 million.

In closing my presentation today I want to talk about how we will achieve our goal of an education and training system that centres on the needs of the learner, and how we will accomplish this in a fiscally responsible way.

We are changing the way we do business within the ministry to accomplish this fundamental goal. We will do it by setting an example in the practice of partnerships and fiscal responsibility.

It has been clear for some time that it is necessary to develop a fairer and more effective system of education financing. This has been the subject of extensive work both within the ministry and in conjunction with the Fair Tax Commission. We are also receiving input into this process from the Advisory Council on Education Finance Reform.

First, however, we felt we had to look in our own backyard. The ministry reorganization will result in considerable cost-efficiencies. But any major restructuring may bring with it some anxiety and dislocation and job loss for some. We have worked hard during our restructuring to be very open, to consult with staff, to keep them informed, to seek their advice and to provide personal and job counselling for those affected by change.

The early retirement packages were accepted by many staff, but that has meant a loss to the ministry in ministerial knowledge. We hope that the new corporate culture we are instituting will compensate for that loss.

As the ministry is going through this major restructuring we expect school boards and post-secondary institutions to examine their own operations and structures to find ways to cut costs and to put more money into the classroom, where it belongs.

The government's overall expenditure control plan announced last April resulted in reduced grants to school boards, colleges and universities. That obviously caused great concern. However, together with the social contract process, this has prompted boards, colleges and universities to look closely at their own operations to find cost-efficiencies and to innovate.

I appointed two fact-finders to look at ways of streamlining school board operations in Windsor-Essex and Ottawa-Carleton. Their reports present a number of possible solutions that other boards will want to consider. The royal commission will also find these reports valuable research for its work.

Some boards are already investigating the idea of consortiums to enable neighbouring boards to share costs in such areas as administration, payroll, transportation and technology.

At the post-secondary level, there are a number of cooperative efforts going on. In one example, my ministry has given a planning grant to McMaster University and Mohawk College to investigate the feasibility of a single health sciences facility.

Many boards, colleges and universities are also taking advantage of the ministry's transition assistance fund to examine their operations and develop permanent, more cost-efficient ways of doing business.

In addition, we now ask school boards to examine their plans for new schools to see if they could include multi-use facilities shared with other community or municipal groups. Schools that include a library, recreation and/or day care centre are examples of good multi-use buildings.

We have taken on major initiatives this year: the restructuring of the ministry, the restructuring of education, the restructuring of the provision of training for jobs. But this is no less than the public expects of us; it is no less than they deserve.

By example, we are proving that partnerships based on mutual trust and respect and a shared vision of the future of lifelong learning can go a long way towards achieving these goals.

While these are difficult times, I believe these are exciting times in education and training. We are moving ahead with initiatives that will reshape the way we approach and deliver education and training opportunities in Ontario. The work we are doing now will benefit generations to come.

Mr Chair and members of the committee, the goals of my ministry are important for all of us and our constituents, and the issues are extremely complex and at times very contentious. I look forward to questions and comments and the opening remarks from the opposition parties.