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| Ontario | 36e | 1e | Discours sur l’éducation | 25 juin 1996 | John Snobelen | Minister of Education and Training | Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario |

Thank you, Mr Chair. I also note that the third party is not represented here and I'm sure their representatives will be disappointed not to be able to be here in person for this statement, but I'll make sure they get copies of it.

I'm pleased to have an opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the accomplishments and initiatives of the Ministry of Education and Training.

In the past year we have taken some major steps in education and training reform, in realizing our goal of achieving an education and training system for Ontario that is characterized by excellence and accountability and geared to job creation and prosperity.

The reforms affect the entire education and training system and are necessary if we are to ensure that the system is geared to the needs of students as we head into a new millennium.

I want to be clear about this. The changes we are bringing to education and training will be real change, not mere tinkering. We will foster and encourage partnerships in the schooling of our children, partnerships that include students, parents, teachers and representatives of the community and business.

We will operate the ministry itself in an economical, efficient and accountable manner. We will ensure that in delivering excellence in the classroom the education system also delivers real value to Ontario taxpayers. To this end, we are working to develop a fair, equitable and efficient way of financing education.

The people of this province are aware that Ontario pays far more to service its enormous debt than it pays out for elementary and secondary education. This is a major threat to the future of our children. It's a threat that we cannot tolerate.

Within the mandate of this government, we are committed to putting in place an education and training system that will serve the next generation well and give hope to our young people for jobs and security. And, by doing so, we will enhance Ontario's future prosperity.

The government is committed to providing Ontario's young people with an elementary and secondary education that will impart the skills, knowledge, habits and disciplines necessary for them to pursue their life goals.

We are committed to developing an education system that represents real value for taxpayers, for the students and the parents of Ontario, a system that by any measure uses its resources -- human, physical and financial -- to the maximum.

To this end, we have passed four pieces of legislation which I will discuss further as I progress in my remarks, but first I want to remind members that the measures the government has taken are measures we said we would do more than two years ago with the public release of the Common Sense Revolution. That document grew out of the discussions we had with thousands of Ontarians over a four-year period.

We heard the people of Ontario talk of their needs, their fears and their hopes for themselves and for their families. Above all, we heard their desire for lasting change in the way Ontario is governed. The government has acted to bring about the kind of real change needed to ensure hope and prosperity for all Ontarians.

Since becoming Minister of Education and Training a year ago, I personally have talked with hundreds of students, parents, teachers, trustees, community and business leaders and ordinary taxpayers. What they told me is that they believe that education savings can be achieved without compromising education quality. They also said there must be opportunities to develop cost-saving solutions locally, and they said that while these matters needed urgent attention, we must also allow time to ensure that we maintain quality programming for our students. Our actions show that we have heard and responded to the needs of students, parents and taxpayers.

To make our vision for education and training a reality, we have established the following goals:

-- To provide Ontario's young people with the best education possible so they will have the necessary skills and knowledge and the competence to achieve their goals and to contribute to Ontario's prosperity.

-- To ensure that qualified applicants have access to post-secondary education.

-- To establish a training system relevant to the needs of workers and employers, one that will help Ontarians find and keep jobs in increasingly competitive global markets.

-- To operate the Ministry of Education and Training in an economical, efficient and accountable way.

The government is clear about the need for a different education and training system, a system characterized by excellence and accountability and geared to job creation and prosperity. Working with our partners in education and training, we will get results for the students, trainees, parents and taxpayers of this province. We can, and we will, do better for less.

Now let me detail some of the specific initiatives the Ministry of Education and Training has undertaken in the areas of elementary, secondary, post-secondary education, and training.

We passed Bill 34, which enacts key elements of the education savings strategy I announced on March 6. It's part of our plans to help school boards bring education spending under control and achieve savings of about $400 million in 1996-97. We have clearly stated that classroom funding should be protected and taxes should not be increased.

A number of school boards have in fact heard this message and acted responsibly. For instance, some boards have achieved savings without increasing property taxes or laying off teachers, while retaining programs like junior kindergarten, which is now an option that the ministry funds at the normal per student rate.

Here are just a few examples of school board responsiveness:

The Huron County Board of Education decided to sell its board headquarters building and move into one of its schools.

The Sudbury Board of Education is twinning and sharing principals in 12 schools.

The Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry County Board is renting space at a minimal cost at St Lawrence College to house French-language secondary school programs.

There are many other school boards that have demonstrated innovative thinking and a commitment to control costs and protect classroom spending. Bill 34 gives boards a clear mandate to make cooperative arrangements in order to cut expenditures. It also requires each school board to publish an annual report of the measures it has taken to reduce spending and improve efficiency through cooperation with other boards or public sector institutions.

The school board restructuring task force which was commissioned by the previous government indicated in its recent public report that 47% -- that's roughly $6.7 billion -- of all education dollars spent in Ontario are directed towards items outside of the classroom. That's money spent on items such as school board administration, transportation and custodial maintenance.

The report recommends that non-classroom expenditures made by school boards, and I quote, "be limited to 40% of their total budgets." This in itself would reduce total education expenditures in Ontario by about $1 billion each year. Currently, Ontario school boards annually spend approximately $890 million on board administration, $600 million on transportation and $1.2 billion on maintenance services.

It's clear that a significant saving outside the classroom is possible. The challenge is to achieve reductions that will move education spending to sustainable levels while protecting the quality of classroom education. Bill 34 answers this challenge. It points us toward an environment where our important investment in education is a sustainable investment.

The bill also respects and embodies the principle that the province shares responsibility for education with local communities.

As a step in getting spending under control, we have placed a one-year moratorium on new construction of school facilities. Through the general legislative grants we have encouraged boards to reduce expenditures on transportation, central administration, instructional supervision and maintenance services. Greater cooperation between school boards and between boards and other public sector agencies is one important way to achieve these goals. Bill 34 gives boards a clear mandate to make cooperative agreements and it also provides a mechanism to make boards publicly accountable for their actions in this area.

Other parts of Bill 34 show that we have, where necessary, structured each measure to allow boards to make decisions that will best serve their local communities while protecting educational opportunities.

For instance, we've allowed more flexibility to adapt administrative structures to local needs. We've provided more flexibility to school boards by removing references to the number of sick days to which teachers are entitled.

In addition, I have asked a small working group to investigate and make recommendations by the end of this year on the feasibility of differentiated staffing; that is, having qualified people who do not have an Ontario teacher's certificate perform functions such as library, career counselling and computer-related services.

Bill 30 is an example of this government's commitment to a comprehensive approach to testing, accountability and improvement. With the passage of Bill 30, we established a new office operating at arm's length from government, the Education Quality and Accountability Office or EQAO.

An independent, comprehensive assessment program is key to achieving a responsive and effective education system in which taxpayers can see value for their investment, and Ontario's young people can achieve excellence in their education.

Ontario's assessment program will include testing of all English- and French-language students in grades 3 and 11, with sampling in maths and sciences in grades 6 and 9.

In another area of testing of particular interest to adult students, we have announced the expansion of the general educational development testing services program, normally called GED. The GED tests, which have been successful in Canada for more than 25 years, will help adults earn the equivalent of a secondary school diploma.

The program is aimed at adults 19 years of age and older who have been out of school for at least a year. Through the GED tests they will be able to show that through their life and work experiences they have acquired the knowledge and skills associated with, and comparable to, high school completion. I am pleased that we are expanding this program to make it available to more people and thereby creating greater access to jobs and post-secondary education.

Let me move now to secondary school reform. We are working with our education partners to develop reform of our secondary school program. Members of the external advisory group have been very important to the progress we've made to date.

When implemented, the reforms will result in a new four-year secondary school program with high graduation standards for all students. There will be clear course requirements for students planning to go to university, college or the workplace. There will be expanded cooperative education and work experience programs, and improved guidance and career counselling policies and programs.

Today's new information-based economy puts a greater premium on learning than at any other time in our history. In an increasingly competitive world, high-paying, productive jobs will be available to people with the necessary knowledge and skills. With this in mind, we announced in May a major funding increase to expand the use of leading-edge computer technology in our schools. The program is the technology incentive partnership program, or TIPP. It's a partnership with the ministry, the private sector and the school system to bring the latest technology to Ontario classrooms.

Last year, the government committed $20 million to educational technology and had a great response. We have doubled that to $40 million. This government's commitment, coupled with the commitment from the private sector and the schools, will result in a total investment of about $80 million. This clearly indicates not only the tremendous support for the project, but also that the private-public partnerships can truly benefit taxpayers.

Another piece of legislation we have passed is Bill 31. It established the Ontario College of Teachers, which will be a self-funded professional body through which teachers of this province will regulate their own profession.

The Ontario Teachers' Federation and its affiliates will, of course, continue to provide collective bargaining and other protective and professional development services for their members. The college will strengthen teaching, increase public confidence in education and ensure public accountability.

By giving teachers the power to regulate their own profession, we are putting the responsibility for excellent teaching in the hands of those who are best qualified to know what a teacher should and must be, today and in the future.

High-quality education must have high standards and a curriculum that clearly outlines what students are expected to know and when they're expected to know it. The ministry will develop a province-wide curriculum so that all students will have access to programs of consistent quality and relevance. This approach will reduce costs and wasteful duplication. At the same time, students will be well prepared to meet the challenges and to achieve success.

The ministry will finalize provincial standards so that students will have a solid foundation in the key areas of language and mathematics. We will also develop standards in other important subject areas such as science and technology to maintain the quality and relevance of learning in Ontario. In a related area, we are also making progress in developing a uniform report card. A provincial report card will be field-tested in over 300 schools across the province in the 1996-97 school year.

In addition to the changes in the elementary and secondary education system, we are also looking for change in the post-secondary system. In order to achieve the kind of university and college system we want for Ontario, we will consult with our post-secondary partners to develop a new policy framework for the post-secondary system. We will soon be releasing a discussion paper to facilitate the consultation.

Our objectives are excellence, access to post-secondary education for qualified students, programs and institutions that meet students' varying needs, accountability to users of the system and taxpayers in general, and an ability to respond to changing economic and societal needs.

I'd like to take a moment to congratulate the post-secondary sector for a job well done and the cooperation to date.

I believe Bill 45, which integrates the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education into the University of Toronto, addresses these very goals. It's an excellent example of how eliminating duplication of services can save money and lead to greater efficiencies in our education system, and will save Ontario taxpayers $10 million over the next 10 years.

In our training system, workers and employers will benefit from a more focused and cost-efficient training system. We will reform the apprenticeship system to make it more flexible and relevant to the needs of employees and employers. We will continue to establish occupational standards to provide certification to ensure high-quality training and to make it easier for workers to move from one job to another.

In addition, we will explore options for apprenticeship programs taking advantage of modern technology for program delivery. We will make it easier for young people to participate in apprenticeship programs. Apprenticeship training will be expanded to include occupations emerging in the new economy. Through the colleges of applied arts and technology, a more effective training consulting service will support the training needs of local businesses. To provide better and more accessible service, we will combine a number of separate employment preparation programs into a single, cohesive program which will eliminate duplication of services and give people the basic skills they need to participate in the workforce.

The integration of the programs, services and staff from the Ontario Training and Adjustment Board into the ministry will make for more efficient use of taxpayers' dollars.

The ministry will work with the Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Tourism to provide provincial government leadership in ensuring that the system operates efficiently to serve both workers and employers.

I want to go back to something I touched on at the beginning of my remarks: government accountability.

The government has taken a bold step by producing business plans for all ministries, including of course the Ministry of Education and Training. This innovation does two things: First, it identifies and establishes the core functions of each ministry -- the things we do well and will continue to do; second, it brings to bear actual performance measures by which taxpayers, stakeholders and the public can gage how well those core businesses are being delivered. That's accountability.

The business plan for the Ministry of Education and Training outlines the strategic directions for the ministry and defines new priorities for the future of education and training in Ontario. It shows how we will shape our organization and systems and allocate our resources to create an education and training system that is second to none.

We developed this plan after a thorough review of our current activities. Every program and service was put to the test: Was it relevant to the needs of students, parents, educators and the public? Was it relevant to Ontario's agenda for more accountable, innovative and effective government?

What we have determined is that the ministry must evolve from providing direct services to developing strategic policies for education and training, with the proviso that if a clear business case can be made for direct delivery of a service, we will provide it.

By sharing resources and expertise, the ministry will eliminate duplication of services, and the savings will be reinvested into areas where students will benefit directly.

The Ministry of Education and Training's core activities will include establishing policy, legislation and standards for education and training; supporting an excellent, equitable and cost-effective education and training system; ensuring accountability to the students and trainees of Ontario, to our partners in education and training, including of course parents and taxpayers.

Only an excellent education and training system can deliver the world-class knowledge and skills we need to compete in the new economy. Only when we can measure results and report them publicly can we know that the students and trainees of this province are achieving results. And only through prudent spending can we preserve the future for all Ontarians.

That then, Mr Chair and members of the estimates committee, is my presentation. I think it's clear that the ministry is moving ahead with real and needed change to the education and training system in Ontario. At the heart of this change is quality, accountability and real value.

Finally, it's clear that this change is being brought about through partnerships. In the face of all the challenges ahead for our education system, the one constant I have discovered in conversations with hundreds of individuals and groups across this province has been the value and necessity of working in partnership. We need to work together, and increasingly we are working together.