|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Ontario | 37e | 1e | Discours sur l’éducation | 26 septembre 2000 | Janet Ecker | Minister of Education | Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario |

Thank you very much, Mr Chair, and to committee members, I very much welcome the opportunity to be here before the standing committee on estimates again.

Last year in my opening remarks, I provided committee members with an overview of the government's education reforms and some of the plans we had for this mandate. Today I'd like to provide a bit of an update on what we've accomplished over the past year in our efforts to improve our publicly funded education system.

First let me state very clearly that our goal for education reform is the same today as when we were elected in 1995 and then re-elected last year, and that's to give our students the best education possible and to focus on higher student achievement. We want to improve quality, to improve classroom funding, and to improve accountability not only to students but also to parents and taxpayers.

We fully recognize that we have a very detailed and a very comprehensive agenda for change. We also recognize that bringing change to a very large, complex system like education is certainly never easy and is almost always controversial. We also recognize that the job isn't done yet, although we like to point out that we have made, and would be very pleased to discuss where we have made, significant progress.

We're responding to demands by parents and taxpayers for fair and equitable funding, for more up-to-date and rigorous curricula and for regular assessment of our students' basic skills.

This is the third year of student-focused funding and we're continuing to follow our plan as laid out. Where possible, we are continuing to find administrative savings and to direct more of that money to the classroom. When required, we are investing new money in the classroom, as we did significantly this school year.

We've also listened carefully to our education partners, to suggestions about improvements in how we financially support the system. I'd like to just briefly outline some of the key priority areas.

First, of course, is special education. One of my first conclusions in this job was that special education needed significant help. The system was not meeting the students' and the parents' needs as well as it should, and we certainly needed to invest more resources.

In January, I announced a three-year plan that brings in province-wide standards for special education, that improves accountability to parents, and that also increases funding significantly. I should also note that this is the third year in a row that we've increased funding for special needs to boards across the province.

This year's increase was 12%; it amounts to about $140 million in classrooms this school year. To break that out, $43 million of that was in the special education intensive support amount, which supports our very high-needs students. As well, the special $30 million top-up that had been put in last year will actually be maintained as regular funding this year and in future years.

In the May budget we announced an additional $70 million, that is in classrooms this year, to support early interventions for students from junior kindergarten to grade 3, to expand early learners' programs for students with speech and language disorders or for learning disabilities and also to increase the number of specialist teachers and professional support staff.

With all of these enhancements, the 12% increase, we're now spending more than $1.3 billion a year on special education, which is certainly more than has ever been spent before. But the other point that is important to note is that boards cannot use these funds for anything other than special education.

We know that although certainly funding for special education is important, how we're using that funding is equally important. We've taken as part of our plan steps to make sure we have a continuous improvement process and also that we're giving school boards the stability they need to plan effectively. For example, in January of this year, many months before school boards are used to receiving this information, we gave them a guarantee that they would receive at least as much money as they'd had the previous year for high-needs students.

We're also looking at ways to work with teachers and boards to improve the process for allocating money for high-needs students to make it less bureaucratic. We had certainly heard there were some serious problems this year that clearly showed that some boards or some staff in some boards were having great difficulty meeting the needs. For example, one of the things that concerned me was when parents would be told their child couldn't receive service somehow because some form, application process or whatever hadn't been followed through on, which is absolutely incorrect. It's certainly not what the policy or any of the decisions should be putting in place. We need to be and are continuing to work with our partners to have a better process.

We're also setting standards for individual education plans for special-needs students, also for school boards' overall special education programs. Those standards will start to take effect in the 2001-02 school year. The reason we think it's important to set those standards, other than that that certainly reflects the recommendations we had from our education partners, is that we think it will clearly set out the responsibilities of the ministry and the boards; it will clearly acknowledge the best practices and make sure that all boards are following best practices; and it will also provide parents with a stronger voice in the education of their children. The emphasis on better and clearer standards will give parents a better picture of the services they can expect the school boards to be providing for their children.

As I mentioned, we have individual education plans which are required to be developed for every student who's been formally identified as having special needs. Starting this school year, we're going to be monitoring samples of those plans from selected boards because we want to make sure they're accurately describing the special education programs that are being provided, the services that each individual student should be receiving, and we want to make sure that if there are improvements that can be made, we can do so.

I mentioned our student-focused funding. This is our third year in this student-focused funding approach. Parents and taxpayers want to know that education spending is focused on the classroom, where it can do the most good, and that's certainly the goal. We've introduced several measures to continue to cut costs of administration and bureaucracy and to reinvest those savings in teaching and learning.

Of course, as the members will probably recall, that school board administration since 1995 has declined by approximately $150 million. For example, we have 2,000 fewer school board trustees. There are fewer school boards; there used to be 129 and now there are 72. There used to be 777 senior administrators working for those boards; there are now 512. We're starting to see that that money is shifting from administration into classrooms.

Members last year had raised several questions about that, so I'll just give a few numbers and I'm sure we'll have an opportunity with the staff here to go into it in more detail for the members.

If you look at the big picture, last year we spent approximately $13.2 billion on elementary and secondary education. In the current school year, estimated overall spending will increase by $300 million, bringing the total to about $13.5 billion. Last year, classroom funding was $575 million more than it had been in 1997, the year before we introduced our new funding model. This year we expect classroom spending to be $700 million more than in 1997.

It's important to note that the provincial funding for education is also supporting approximately $2 billion worth of new school construction and new spaces for approximately 170,000 students. Again, from 1995 to the year 2000, we've built 198 new schools, and there have been 150 additions to schools or major school renovations that have been completed because of the improvements in the way we fund school construction.

Last March we announced the details of funding for this school year and we outlined a number of priority areas in addition to what I've talked about. For example, we recognized the need to assist students who are facing challenges in meeting the new, province-wide standards for literacy and numeracy skills. We committed an additional $25 million in new money to help students in grades 7 to 10 improve their literacy and math skills, certainly something that both parents and teachers said was an important priority.

To ensure that small rural and northern school boards in Ontario have sufficient resources to operate effectively, we increased funding specifically dedicated to the rural and northern schools by $4.5 million. One of the other priorities had to do with improving English-language competency for both immigrant and Canadian-born children whose first language is not English. Accordingly, we have adjusted the criteria for the English-as-a-second-language grant. That means that boards will be able to increase their spending by $20 million this school year.

We're also improving our support to the French-language school boards. We added $10 million to those grants to help them face what is a very significant challenge for their students, who enter their schools often with less developed skills in their first language than what you find with anglophone students. Those boards will have the flexibility to use this funding in the most effective way that they believe will help their students.

One of the other concerns we'd heard from teachers and parents was the need for more principals. We're adding $10 million that is funding the hiring of 100 more principals this year province-wide. It also is allowing part-time principals to spend more time undertaking their responsibilities. Again, this will be of particular assistance to rural school boards and to French-language school boards.

We provide school boards with regular annual funding to purchase textbooks and learning materials. This school year, for example, there's $67 million through the regular funding specifically for high school textbooks, to use one example. But recognizing the needs of the new curriculum, we have been providing additional funding on top of that. For example, we have provided an investment of $30 million this year for textbooks and graphing calculators for our grade 10 students. This is in addition to $30-million investment we made last year for our grade 9 students for textbooks and graphing calculators. There's also $40 million in additional funding that is being used for textbooks and learning resources for grades 11 and 12 students as that curriculum rolls out over the next two years. This brings the total provincial funding commitment on top of the annual funding, as I mentioned before, to $100 million for secondary school textbooks and learning materials.

One of the other pressures we heard about were transportation cost pressures, so this year there is an additional $23 million to relieve those transportation cost pressures for boards. Again, we are continuing to work with our school board partners to improve how we fund transportation. It's an area where we have certainly said that we need to improve the way that funding works for boards.

As you know, most school boards, although not all, are in the bargaining process for new collective agreements. Certainly all of us share a desire for keeping our children in school. We all want to see fair and reasonable contracts negotiated this year without disruption to students and to classroom instruction, so part of the grant regulation announcement in March was $182 million new money for compensation resources to assist boards in reaching those agreements.

One of the other issues is smaller class size, again a very important priority from both teachers' and parents' perspectives. We've seen and we've certainly heard from parents and teachers about a disturbing trend towards larger average class sizes around the province. So we are taking steps to deal with this.

We took the first step two years ago and that was to cap the average class size across the school boards in legislation-something that simply had not existed before-to try and stop the upward trend and start a downward trend.

The second step: in May of this year we announced additional funding. It's a total of $263 million for more teachers to have smaller classes. It works out to $101 million to lower elementary class sizes. We have reduced the maximum board-wide average class size to 24 pupils for junior kindergarten to grade 3, for example. Also, of that $263 million, $162 million is reducing the board-wide average for high school classes as well.

Thirdly, another important step in stopping the upward trend and starting a downward trend: we're ensuring through the legislation that we passed this spring that school boards are clearly reporting on their average class size, both by school and on a board-wide basis, so that we know if it is working or if it is not working. Under the Education Accountability Act, I can direct an investigation if we have concerns that class-size requirements are not being met as they should be.

Again, one of the other pressures we recognize is the growing demand for new teachers, so we're working closely with Ontario's faculties of education and we've increased funding for new teacher training by $45 million. Between last year and 2004, this is going to mean 6,000 additional new teachers coming out into our education system. Not only is it important to meet the demand for new teachers as we bring down class size and as enrolment grows in the system, but also one of the positive trends that we are seeing is a significant increase in the number of young people or people from other careers who are applying to teachers' colleges across the province to become teachers. So we want to make sure that the colleges have the positions to take advantage of the commitment that is being shown by people to be teachers. I think it's a wonderful, positive statement on teaching.

One of the other important initiatives we have deals with the new curriculum. As you know, as we said we would do, we introduced a new, more rigorous and comprehensive curriculum from kindergarten straight through to Grade 12. This is the first comprehensive top-to-bottom overhaul of the curriculum that has been seen. I don't know if anybody in our ministry's been around since Egerton Ryerson, but I am told by those who obviously have better memories than I that this is the most significant and comprehensive overhaul since Egerton set up the place.

Again, our overriding objective here with the new curriculum is to improve student achievement and to prepare students for success in the future, not only on the job or in apprenticeships but also in post-secondary education because we have certainly heard very clearly, from not only parents and students who'd left high school but certainly also from post-secondary institutions and from employers, that our students simply didn't have the skills, the knowledge, the abilities that they needed in order to succeed. So the new curriculum has been a lot of very hard work by a whole range of people-education experts, teachers, representatives from universities, colleges, employer groups-to make sure that we are indeed preparing our students for what they need to be prepared for when they leave high school.

Now that the new kindergarten and elementary curriculum is in place, we're continuing to phase in the new high school program over four years, taking it a step at a time, again, to respond to concerns that we've heard from teachers and parents about, if you will, slowing down or phasing in some of the changes. So we are indeed doing that in the high school curriculum. As I said, grades 11 and 12 are out earlier to give additional time.

I think it's important to note that throughout the curriculum and the new programs the emphasis is clearly where it should be: on science, technology, math, reading, writing, those literacy and numeracy skills that our students need; technology, as I mentioned, being taught in earlier grades. All of this is designed to help our students understand their community and their wider world in a much better fashion.

It's important also to recognize that for the first time, and coming at it in such a comprehensive way, each successive grade builds on what the students learned the year before, so that it flows much better than curriculum had many times in the past.

The new curriculum sets out consistent standards and clear expectations about what should be taught right across the province. So grade 11 and 12, as I mentioned, is already out. That's over a year ahead of when it's required for grade 11; two years for grade 12. This will certainly provide teachers with the lead time they need to prepare for the new curriculum.

One of the other messages we've heard is that teachers have requested that we expand teacher training in the new curriculum. For example, one of the great success stories has been the summer institutes that we've had this past summer. Over 9,000 teachers took part in summer institutes. These are jointly sponsored by the Ministry of Education and the Ontario Teachers' Federation. We were oversubscribed last year and we doubled the number for this year. We were oversubscribed again so we're going to have to expand again. They were a wonderful opportunity for teachers this summer.

Over four years, we are providing $370 million in training and resources to support the new curriculum.

The new curriculum sets higher standards for achievement by Ontario students, but I also recognize that simply setting higher standards does not meet our goals of quality education if we're not helping students to reach these levels of improvement. So, as I mentioned, we've committed an additional $25 million in new money to help as many as 80,000 students in grades 7 to 10 improve their literacy and math skills, and also $70 million of new money for literacy and other related skills for our junior kindergarten to grade 3 students, those very crucial early years.

In addition, we're implementing a grade 10 literacy test as part of our commitment to ensuring that our students have the literacy skills they need to compete in today's economy. This test is being phased in this school year. It will become a graduation requirement for the 2001-02 school year.

Also to help students, we have the teacher adviser program, assigning teachers to a small group of students. They hold regular meetings with them and with parents to help the students make good decisions about their education and long-term goals. This school year we've invested another $64 million in new money to make this program a success.

Now that all the new curriculum is out, we are working to ensure better teaching of it and better learning of it. For example, in one of the steps we've taken to address the challenges of teaching the new curriculum in combined grades, we have what we call a curriculum partnership. It has representatives not only from the ministry but from the faculties of education and the Ontario Teachers' Federation. They are working on additional resources for teachers teaching combined grades in elementary levels. It is interesting to note, however, that the number of combined grades-and again, this is because of school construction, smaller class size and other factors-has decreased in the province. The curriculum partnership has identified the need for dedicated resources for teacher training to assist with teaching the new curriculum in the combined grades, so we are moving forward on doing that.

We are also providing school boards with $14 million for teachers' professional development to assist them in implementing the new curriculum.

All of this, however, underlines the challenge and the importance of making sure all of our teachers stay as up-to-date as possible. While we certainly recognize and know that we have many excellent teachers-we've all seen the amazing work they do, both in our own lives and also for our children. The gift they give to students, encouraging academic excellence, personal discipline, good citizenship, for example-those are things that can influence us for the rest of our lives. But knowing that we have excellent teachers doesn't mean that we also don't need to do more on teacher training and steps to make sure that they are as up to date as they possibly can be and to make sure that we are ensuring teaching excellence.

As promised, we have introduced the framework for the Ontario teacher testing program to ensure that all teachers have the best possible skills and training. We're now working with our education partners to put this program, as announced, in place.

For example, one of the steps that comes into effect this month: all new applicants seeking teacher certification in Ontario who obtained their training in a language other than English or French are required to pass an oral and written language proficiency test to ensure that they can communicate clearly in either English or French before they teach in Ontario.

Next fall teachers will be starting the recertification process that will be required every five years to ensure they are up to date in knowledge, skills and training. Teachers will be completing successfully a number of required courses, professional development activities etc. This is based on a royal commission recommendation which all three parties supported. By next fall we'll have new province-wide standards to ensure that principals and school boards are evaluating and assessing teachers in a consistent manner across the province. An important improvement that will be made in this is that parents will also be given an opportunity to be involved in teacher evaluation, because their feedback is important as well.

In addition, we'll have a new certification review process to determine whether teachers who are unable to meet those standards and who are not able to be remediated, if you will, are not able to meet with extra help, should actually have their certification removed. Beginning in 2001-02, all new teachers will be required to pass a qualifying test, very much like a lawyer's bar exam, as a requirement for initial certification or licensing by the Ontario College of Teachers. This will help ensure that they know their curriculum subjects and have the necessary teaching skills before they enter the classroom.

Another improvement: we're working with our partners to design what is called an induction, or what I would call an internship program, very similar to what many doctors have gone through as interns, an opportunity for all new teachers to receive coaching and support from their more experienced colleagues. This is very much to ensure they get off to a very strong start at the beginning of their careers.

One of the other initiatives I'd like to touch on has to do with safe schools and recognizing that teachers can't teach and students can't learn if they're in fear for their safety. In too many classrooms that is still the case across the province. Last June the Legislature passed the Safe Schools Act, which includes the code of conduct. Earlier this month, new regulations under that legislation took effect to help make Ontario's schools safer and encourage an atmosphere that is more respectful and more conducive to learning.

The code sets out clear, consistent standards of behaviour. It sets out mandatory penalties for things like assaulting teachers, bringing drugs or weapons to school. It sets out clear consequences for students who are not meeting these standards. The code, with the other initiatives in place, will create a learning environment that can foster respect for others and can promote respect, responsibility and civility.

I also should point out that we want to make sure that we have programs for suspended or expelled students, strict discipline programs for those who require it and other programs for those who are suspended, so they can continue with their education and deal with whatever other problems they may well have.

I wish to conclude my introductory remarks. We certainly recognize that education today is not a luxury, it's a necessity, and that's why we've laid out the plans we have for education reform, which we are continuing to move forward to. I look forward to discussing these and the other issues more fully with my caucus colleagues and other members of the committee.