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| Ontario | 38e | 1e | Discours sur l’éducation | 4 octobre 2005 | Christopher Bentley | Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities | Ontario Liberal Party |

I thank the members for your attendance and for the invitation here today, and I look forward to your questions. Permit me to make a few introductory remarks. I'm sure we will get into some further details during the course of the day.

It's interesting; it's an era these days where the workforce must be as well trained as ever in our country's history. We need a post-secondary education and training system that will meet the demands not simply of yesterday, not just of today, but of the future, and the future demands for our society are enormous. I'm pleased to come before the committee and highlight some of the programs that we'll be involved in over the course of the next while, hopefully, with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

The Minister of Finance outlined our government's approach and rationale in the recent 2005 budget when he said that education is the "prerequisite for prosperity" and that "an investment in post-secondary education today is an investment in jobs tomorrow." He said these words in announcing Reaching Higher: The McGuinty Government Plan for Post-Secondary Education. That's a plan that provides the most significant investment in post-secondary education and skills training this province has seen in more than 40 years. It is not simply an investment today; it's an investment in the future, it's an investment in the people of Ontario, it's an investment that will create the foundation for prosperity in the future. It is indeed an unprecedented investment in post-secondary education and training.

So why do we need it? I alluded to that briefly in my first few comments. You can always borrow your capital, you can buy your resources, but it's the people of Ontario who are our real strength. We're investing in the people of Ontario. We're investing to ensure that they are well trained and knowledgeable and that they have the skills to adapt to the future, skills the likes of which they have never before had. That's the point of the investment.

You can reduce the benefits from these investments down to costs. Studies show that, on average, a person who leaves high school without graduating earns $14,000 a year less than someone who achieves a certificate or diploma in a trade or college program. So to society as a whole there's a benefit and to the individual there's a clear, quantifiable benefit from post-secondary education, whether it's college, university or skills enhancement or trade of some description.

To meet the challenges of the future, we need everybody not simply to achieve what they might have achieved yesterday, but to achieve more. That's why the program is a Reaching Higher plan. It's to provide the ability for Ontarians to achieve levels they might not have aspired to in the past, to achieve training they might not have been able to in the past, to indeed reach higher.

There are three parts to the Reaching Higher plan: access, quality and accountability. When we talk about those three, we're talking about improving the access for Ontarians, improving the quality of the education and establishing and improving the accountability for the funds that the people of Ontario are expending in post-secondary education and training. Let me just touch on a few of the points.

Greater access: What we're determined to do through the Reaching Higher plan is improve access for all Ontarians to post-secondary education and training opportunities, and it comes in many different ways. First of all, to meet the demands of the double cohort, we're going to increase the number of spaces available to the people of Ontario, not simply in undergraduate education but in graduate education.

Let me address the graduate education piece just a little bit. When you compare the rate at which Ontarians decide to enter master's or Ph.D.-level programs, we're considerably less than a number of jurisdictions with which we compete economically. That's not a good foundation for success for the future. What we're determined to do as a province is be able to compete. What we're determined to do is ensure that our people have the skill levels that exceed those of competing jurisdictions.

Our goal, which we will achieve through the Reaching Higher plan, is to ensure that the number of graduate students increases by 12,000 per year by the year 2007-08 and by 14,000 by the year 2009-10. This will require a significant expansion of our capacity, a significant investment both in operating and capital, but it is essential if we're to meet the demands of the future.

But that's not the only level at which we might want to discuss access. Less than half the people of Ontario actually decide to go on to post-secondary education. We need more of them to consider the opportunities, and we're going to be developing plans to encourage people to indeed reach higher and achieve what they might not have thought possible or might have decided wasn't necessary in the past.

In particular, we're going to reach to a number of groups that have tended to be underrepresented in post-secondary education and skills training opportunities. For example, we have established a specific fund to give an extra boost to access opportunities for all Ontarians, but in particular aboriginals, francophones, persons with disabilities and people who happen to be the first generation of their family to consider post-secondary opportunities. Indeed, we have established or are establishing committees in three of these areas, not to expend money but to provide strategic advice on initiatives that we might follow to expand access to the people of Ontario.

Another part of the access agenda is to ensure that people located throughout the province have access to post-secondary education. What you'll find when you take a look at the statistics is that people in remote areas -- actually, people outside of very urban areas -- tend to be far less likely to access post-secondary opportunities than those in the heavily urbanized parts of the province. That's an issue we need to address and deal with. We need to come up with strategies -- and we're determined to do this -- to ensure that all Ontarians have access; not necessarily a campus at every doorstep, but the opportunity for Ontarians, wherever located, to have access to post-secondary opportunities.

Access has another aspect to it as well, though, and that's the aspect of being able to afford to go on to post-secondary education opportunities or training. For many years, the student assistance programs in this province were not improved. They did not change with the times and they did not change with the costs. Fully a quarter of the $6.2 billion we are investing in the Reaching Higher plan is for improved student assistance; that's 1.5 billion extra dollars over five years.

We started the student access assistance initiatives by freezing tuition for two years, and now we're working with students on a framework for a tuition approach that will follow. But before you implement that framework, you have to invest in post-secondary education, which we're doing, and you have to improve student assistance, which is what the $1.5 billion is designed to do.

In fact, this year we had the opportunity to implement the most extensive changes to the student assistance program since its inception, highlighted by the access grants for low-income students. Some 32,000 students in first and second years will be able to receive a tuition grant -- not a loan, but a grant -- toward their tuition, up to the full cost of the tuition in first year, and up to $3,000 in second year. It's the most significant initiative in terms of access since the grants were eliminated. These access grants were eliminated in the early 1990s. It is indeed a student's ability, not what's in their wallet, which should determine access to post-secondary opportunities.

I'd also like to highlight the improvements in terms of quality. For many years, post-secondary education institutions did not see their funding for operating expenditures from government increase much or at all. In fact, some years were characterized by decreases for some post-secondary education institutions. This had a profound effect. It meant that the institutions were forced to look where they could for money, and that was usually in the pockets of students and their families. It also meant they weren't able to hire the faculty that they would have liked to have hired, to provide the student resources and the library resources that they would have liked to have provided.

So we're making the most significant increase in operating expenditures in the course of this Reaching Higher plan, and that will enable the institutions to hire more faculty, to provide extra faculty-student interaction, to increase student resources, such as library or student support resources -- indeed, to improve the quality of the education that students receive at our colleges and universities.

We're going to do this in a number of different ways, but we're going to do it in a way that is accountable. We are absolutely determined that the money we invest -- and it is investment by all of the people of this province -- will achieve the results that we outline. That is a slightly different approach that has been taken in the past. There will be long-term accountability agreements that will begin next year that will give the institutions time to plan, will give the institutions knowledge of the expectations, and will provide for accountability, so that when the people of Ontario, through the government, provide money to institutions to achieve certain results, we'll be able to ensure that those results are in fact achieved. We're working now on that accountability framework.

I want to say that we are also investing to ensure accountability in a specific area and direction. We are determined to ensure that our northern universities and colleges and our rural colleges and universities are fully and absolutely supported. We will be doing that through the quality fund that we have established and by working very closely with our colleges and universities. We have established a specific fund for northern and rural colleges. That fund will grow to $20 million by the end of 2007-08, and again, it is designed to ensure high-quality, accessible education at those institutions.

The challenges of northern colleges and rural colleges are significant because sometimes they don't get the economies of scale that a heavily urbanized college can get. We're determined to ensure that students attending those institutions can find a full range of programs, a high-quality education. It's part of an access agenda, yes, but it's also part of the quality agenda.

In terms of health and human resources, we're determined to ensure that the people of Ontario have the professionals they need when they need them. I was pleased to attend the opening of the new Northern Ontario School of Medicine just several weeks ago -- a huge investment by the people of Ontario in northern medical education. It will not only ensure that we have extra medical school graduates -- it has already begun at two campuses, Lakehead and Laurentian, with 56 students -- but it will also ensure that those students have special knowledge of the challenges and the opportunities of practising medicine in the north, in remote regions.

Studies show that when you are trained close to a particular region, you tend to stay in that region once you graduate. That is certainly the expectation of the Northern Ontario School of Medicine graduates. It is a significant investment by the people of Ontario and it's a very important investment by the people of Ontario in the future of the north and the future of the health care of the people of the north.

In addition, we're investing money in nursing initiatives throughout the province to ensure that the health care needs of the people of Ontario are met and, in particular, that we have enough nurses. Decisions made in the past actually reduced the complement of nurses. Our determination is to ensure that we have enough nurses, and our contribution to that is to provide the funding to support the programs. We have a goal of 4,000 new nursing spaces this year.

In summary, the Reaching Higher plan is an investment in the people of Ontario and an investment in the future. It's an investment to ensure that the economy can grow; an investment to ensure that the people of this province have the skills and the knowledge they'll need to compete, not simply within Canada or within North America, but throughout the world.

The Reaching Higher plan of an extra $6.2 billion over five years is the most significant post-secondary education investment in more than 40 years in quality and accessibility with accountability. It is an investment in the future, and I look forward to your questions.