

## **Building the Ontario Education Advantage: Student Achievement**

*Second in a series of mini-discussion papers prepared for the Education Partnership Table to permit wide input to the direction of education in Ontario.*

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Publicly funded education is the cornerstone of a fair, productive and socially cohesive society. The societal gains harnessed from a strong publicly funded education system include and go beyond the ability to graduate students who are better positioned for the global marketplace. The benefits extend to improvements in the physical and mental well-being of individuals, increased citizen participation within communities, as well as higher and sustainable rates of employment. In many ways, our social progress overall is defined by our progress in education.

Ontario education has received a great deal of public and media attention in recent years, but it is startling to see how many of the issues were ultimately about “who was in charge of what” and not about our children’s right to the best public education. The McGuinty government is determined that this will change. Its number one priority over the next four years is to ensure that student needs will get the attention they deserve. We are committed to ensuring that publicly funded education is not only worth saving; it is the very best education.

The contemporary mission of publicly funded education and our moral purpose in schools is to ensure that all children and youth are educated

to high levels of intellectual, practical and social competence. It should not matter where you come from, but where you are going. Publicly funded education is the ladder of opportunity.

Realizing this vision in Ontario starts with restoring the dignity of publicly funded education and dedicating our collective will to make it a quest for excellence. This can be reflected in enterprising schools where:

- Students are actively engaged in thinking creatively and independently;
- Teachers and principals are empowered to innovate and are valued for their ability to address the diverse needs and talents of their students; and
- Parents, families and community leaders are invited to participate in the school’s learning mission.

### **A VISION FOR SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS**

How well are our students really doing? To answer the question properly, we need to set out our specific goals for students. The McGuinty government’s vision for unleashing the potential

of every student and unlocking the potential in Ontario's publicly funded education system is:

Our goal is to help develop the intellectual, emotional and physical potential of our children and young adults so they become the best contributing citizens they can be. We believe:

- Every student can learn;
- Every student can and should come to school ready to learn;
- Every student should learn in a school that is properly funded and in good repair;
- Every student in the province should be able to read, write, do math and comprehend at a high level by the age of 12 as the necessary foundation for later educational and social choices;
- Every student should have significant exposure to music and the arts;
- Every student should enjoy regular physical activity, appreciate a healthy lifestyle and have access to a full range of extracurricular activities;
- Every student should be safe and feel safe at school and in the schoolyard;
- Every student should reach the highest level of achievement that his or her ability and willingness to work hard will permit;
- Every student should receive a good outcome from publicly funded education, whether it is an apprenticeship, job placement, or admission to college or university; and
- Every student should know how to think for him or herself, appreciate the rights and obligations of good citizenship and learn about character values.

Each of these outcomes will be tied to specific, measurable results that the government is prepared to take responsibility for achieving. New

kinds of strategies will be developed that engage all parts of the education sector, other government ministries and segments of society at large. The strategies will cover areas such as a new "best start" program, safe schools, healthy schools, arts in education, adult education and others.

### **THE URGENCY TO FOCUS ON STUDENT SUCCESS**

In the context of a well-rounded student experience, no outcome is more indispensable than a solid foundation in literacy and numeracy. This pursuit means more than the basic ability to read, write and do math. It includes the growing capacity throughout the elementary and secondary years to understand information from a variety of sources, to interpret this information across a variety of disciplines and to think and communicate with a high degree of critical analysis.

The opportunity for developing a high level of literacy is contained within a narrow window of a child's life. Children who, by the age of eight, have not learned fundamental literacy can be expected to struggle throughout the rest of their schooling years and be placed at an increased risk of dropping out of school. A new Statistics Canada study concludes that young teens that begin high school with weaker literacy skills are less likely to complete high school.

Every student in the province should be able to read, write, do math and comprehend at a high level by the age of 12 as the necessary foundation for later educational and social choices. Age 12 is a critical juncture, a tipping point, in a child's life. If students by that age become convinced they cannot succeed at school, dropping out becomes a more attractive option.

Student achievement levels, as measured by province-wide tests, show that a significant proportion of students are not reaching the provincial standard in reading, writing and math and that little progress has been made in recent years. Pan Canadian and international results are mixed, but Ontario is consistently lower than several other provinces.

Ontario's 2002-2003 province-wide results indicate that 50 per cent of Ontario Grade 3 students met the provincial standard for reading, 56 per cent met the provincial standard for writing and 57 per cent met the standard for math. For Grade 6, the results indicate that 56 per cent met the standard for reading, 53 per cent met the standard for writing and 53 per cent met the standard for math. Hence, almost half of Ontario's students are not meeting the standard.

Previous conditions for continuous achievement have hardly been optimal. While in the past much was done to measure performance, very little was done from a provincial level to assist struggling students to do better. Additional information sources, such as the Education Quality Indicators Program (EQUIP), provide us with a better understanding of the challenges students face in terms of low income, recent immigrants, sole parent support and other factors.

We certainly have ample evidence that students are struggling. Recent research by Professor Alan King of Queen's University estimates that, of those students who began Grade 9 in Ontario in 1999, at least 25 per cent (40,000 students) will leave school without graduating. Students enrolled in the Grade 9 Applied Math program continue to struggle. The 2002-2003 province-wide Grade 9 math assessments reveal that about 20 per cent of students in the Applied program met the provincial standard. Other

research indicates that youth who drop out have reading skills that average a full level below those who stay in school or graduate.

The challenge to master the foundation skills and leverage the opportunities that exist through the attainment of a strong, well-rounded education is further compounded for those who come to the system with additional challenges such as English-as-a-second-language or special-learning needs.

We know that 50 per cent of students who begin Grade 9 do not graduate or stop their education immediately after Grade 12, although some of these students return to school later in their lives. The stark implications of this statistic become clear when it is understood that an estimated 60 per cent of all new jobs being created require some form of post-secondary education or training. It is equally important to recognize that manual and service-sector jobs also demand good communication, problem-solving and computational-reasoning skills.

The development of literacy skills also has an impact on an individual's overall well being. Studies have found that approximately 30 per cent of adults with severe literacy challenges have undetected or untreated learning disabilities. Furthermore, the research indicates that 50 per cent of adolescent suicides have been diagnosed with having a learning disability and that between 30 to 70 per cent of young offenders have experienced learning problems.

People who are more literate and numerate are more likely to have better jobs, have higher levels of productivity and earning, are less vulnerable to long-term unemployment and are proportionally less likely to have encounters with the justice system. We know that every student can learn. More than ever before, the ability to

function, contribute and prosper in our society requires a sound education, which is built on the foundations of literacy and numeracy.

## **THE GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT**

The government is committed to making improvement in publicly funded education the centrepiece of its mandate, starting with improved student success in literacy and numeracy. We are committed to establishing Ontario as a leader on the national and global scene.

The first step in realizing excellence requires that every student should be able to read, write, do math and comprehend at a high level by the age of 12. Progress will be measured by ensuring that by 2008, 75 per cent of students reach the provincial standard of a 'B' or Level 3 on province-wide reading, writing and math tests - up from the slightly over half that are reaching this marker today. We are addressing this as a first priority because we respect both what is at stake and the significant capacity building required to succeed.

## **TIME FOR ACTION**

Excellence in publicly funded education, as Dr. Rozanski has pointed out, will cost money. The McGuinty government recognizes this need and will put scarce resources into education, at the expense of other programs. Education is a top priority for our government, our economy and our society.

To truly succeed on a large scale though in improving student literacy and numeracy will require strong leadership, unrelenting commitment, time and contribution at all levels. Realizing this vision for student success must be a shared responsibility requiring all of us - teachers, support staff, parents, principals, board leaders,

students and the broader community to work together in partnership.

Government will assume its responsibility to lead. We ask you, our partners, to bring your commitment to students, your expertise and insights and your engagement in this challenge to help shape the details of the strategies to improve student achievement and ensure success.

The main elements of the McGuinty plan are:

- Smaller classes means students do better because they receive more individualized attention. We will reduce class sizes in the early years, from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 3 to a cap of 20 students by the end of our mandate. We will start this fall by targeting schools that are struggling with enormous class sizes and later, throughout our first term, we will bring class sizes down throughout the system.
- Since class sizes caps in the primary years will be made possible by hiring additional teachers funded with new money, school boards will not need to increase class sizes in Grades 4 - 8 to pay for it. Strong development in these early years is crucial if we are to build the foundation we want in place by age 12.
- We will amend the curriculum to put a clear focus on reading, writing and math each day to provide the necessary learning intensity. This will include a dedicated literacy hour and math time each day.
- Supporting teachers in their important task of educating children in literacy and numeracy is crucial. For the first time, every elementary school will have a specially trained lead teacher in JK to Grade 6 literacy and numeracy, skilled in the best practices and

most effective techniques. Elementary teachers across Ontario will have access to training materials and opportunities, training sessions, teaching guides and diagnostic tools to help them with effective reading, writing and math strategies.

- Government will support principals and superintendents in their roles as school instructional leaders and system-wide leaders. This includes providing intensive training and support for school leadership and relieving them of some of the onerous, time-consuming administrative activities that make little difference to literacy and numeracy outcomes of students. Lead educators should be free to share ideas, instead of shuffling paper.
- Government will also create turnaround teams of experts and send them into struggling schools and give principals the tools they need to work together.
- We will provide resources to assist those students and schools who are struggling with additional challenges or disadvantages (e.g., \$112 million in support for students who are struggling the most, already provided this past December).
- We will motivate students to stay in school and graduate through programming supports that meet their needs and aspirations. The McGuinty government will help teenagers succeed by providing aggressive intervention and a curriculum that recognizes that students are not standard.
- We will encourage innovative and enterprising local solutions to old problems by boards, schools and in classrooms. Evidence-based approaches, which demonstrate outcomes can be improved and can work in

other settings, will be made available to others.

- There is a strong linkage between students' readiness to learn and parental engagement in literacy acquisition. Government will engage with parents and provide them with additional resources to encourage and support early reading at home.
- Government will use test scores and real knowledge of the individual challenges schools face to target funding at results, so that schools with a high percentage of low-income or English-as-a-second language families are helped instead of being blamed.
- Government will address the problem of assimilation of Francophone students.
- Government is creating a new literacy and numeracy secretariat that will ensure schools, teachers and students are getting the supports they need when they need them. Michael Fullan, Dean Emeritus of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and an authority on positive change in education will:
  - Advise the Premier and the Minister of Education on managing large-scale change to help improve student achievement in literacy and numeracy;
  - Advise school boards and schools on their plans to boost student achievement; and
  - Establish an advisory council including parent, trustee, principal and teacher representatives from the Education Partnership Table to ensure policies that will encourage and maintain a lasting commitment to student literacy and numeracy are developed and carried out effectively. Widespread public engagement and support for student success is vital to the achievement of our shared goals.

- Our government is committed to a new relationship with boards and schools. We seek to create an environment of peace and stability within our schools. It is our responsibility to lead while respecting principals, teachers and trustees and the vitally important work they do.

The extent to which public confidence in publicly funded education is restored will depend on our collective ability to communicate with and engage the citizens of Ontario in the urgent task of preparing students for educational and lifelong challenges. We ask all our partners to join us in seizing this critical moment in history when publicly funded education so needs and demands our support.

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**Your** feedback is welcome and solicited. It should be directed to:

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