

**Ministry of Education**

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**Ministère de l'Éducation**

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Dear Colleagues,

The end of the school year, combined with my own return to my professorial position at OISE, seems an opportune time to share with you my perspective on where we are in Ontario education. We have much to be proud of, but much still to do.

Let's start with the accomplishments. These are, I hope, well-known to you already. Thousands of Ontario students are achieving higher levels of success today than was the case a few years ago. They have more skills, a better attitude towards education, and a high school diploma they might otherwise have missed, all because of what has changed in our schools in the last few years. These improvements will create positive effects for decades to come. Each person whose outcomes have improved touches more than a few others who also get some of the benefit, whether those are family members, co-workers, or future partners and children. So in total, hundreds of thousands of people will benefit into the distant future because of what we have been doing. It's pretty hard not to feel good about that!

At the same time, unlike many other jurisdictions, these improvements have not come at the cost of educators, or parents, or students. Recent data from an OTF survey shows that new teachers are much more likely to stay in the profession than they were a few years ago. The average retirement age among teachers has gone up by two years, indicating that experienced educators are also more satisfied with their work. While the number of students in Ontario has declined significantly, the number of adults employed in the system has risen substantially, so we can provide more supports to students. But more important than the numbers, is that we are making better use of our people because we have better policies and systems in place, such as school effectiveness, student success, anti-bullying and others.

A couple of weeks ago, we had a delegation visit the ministry from the Gates Foundation in the US. They met with a number of different groups and came away very impressed with the degree of alignment in Ontario between schools, districts and the ministry. On the big issues of goals, direction and general approach, all parties are agreed that Ontario education has been heading in a good direction. Having seen education systems in quite a few other places, I can tell you that this level of agreement is, in itself, a major accomplishment. It has come about through hard work and positive attitudes on the part of all partners in education. To be sure, we have different views on a number of issues. But we work together, we respect each other, and we try hard to resolve differences in positive ways, all of which is fundamental not only to success, but to public confidence in publicly funded education.

I run into many educators who tell me that these are the best years of their careers, and I share that sentiment. Our sense of accomplishment should heighten our desire to do even more. We have a combination of factors in place in Ontario that do not necessarily come together very often or stay together very long, so it is important to take maximum advantage of them while we can.

So what do we need to do? And what are the risks we face?

The most important requirement is to remain focused on improved student outcomes, with even greater precision around effective practice. It is so easy to get distracted by new pressures and demands, or to get complacent, and to forget that we still have too many students who are not achieving the levels of skill they could. As I have often said, everything we know says that people will surprise us over and over with what they can accomplish given the right supports and motivation.

We face a public that has very high expectations for our schools. If we want people to continue to send us their children, and give us billions of dollars in taxes, we have to demonstrate over and over again, day-in and day-out, that they are getting good value from our schools, and that we are firmly committed to steady improvement. This means stronger and clearer communication with the public, not just through formal communications, but in all our daily interactions. It means being honest about our challenges as well as our successes. It means listening carefully to what people are telling us about the way they see our system, and taking those views seriously even when we think they are wrong. Communication is not a frill; it is an essential part of what we do.

One main risk we face is complacency. I am convinced that if we could spread good practices that already exist to most or all schools and classrooms, that alone would generate big improvements in results. Of course, we need to learn more about “what works”, but an even bigger challenge is to have what we do know implemented in 90 percent or more of our schools and classrooms. And we are, in many cases, still quite far from that. For example, we know a great deal about how to engage students in their learning, about how to use formative assessment effectively, or about how to organize balanced literacy, yet these are still not close to being universal practices in our system. Education cannot be a field in which we accept that everyone has their own way of doing things even when their own way is inconsistent with what the evidence tells us about good practice. A real profession insists that all of its members use what is known to be good practice, and professionals do not see that requirement as an infringement on their autonomy. This is not a matter of issuing orders to others. One cannot build excellence by giving people instructions; it is a matter of building people’s skills and knowledge, and putting in place the policies and supports that make good practice a self-sustaining norm.

We have had a rare opportunity in Ontario in the last few years, in which public demand, professional desire and government direction and support have all been aligned. This has resulted in the important gains with which you are very familiar. It is clear that the next few years will be more challenging. Yet we cannot afford to let up – no matter what. The welfare of millions of young people and the future of our province depends on our being able to do even better in the future.

A great opportunity must also mean a great challenge; they are two sides of the same coin. Although I am (once again) leaving the ministry, I am confident that it will continue to develop a positive agenda in continued dialogue with our partners. The ministry has a strong team, with many skilled and experienced staff at all levels, and an approach that is probably more integrated and focused than ever before. We have every reason to remain optimistic.

Deborah Newman, who is Deputy Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities, will also serve as Acting Deputy Minister of Education until a permanent appointment is made. I am confident that she will be as impressed as I have been by the shared work in Ontario's publicly funded school system, and I know that she can count on your support.

As for me, it has been my great privilege, again, to have had the opportunity to work with so many wonderful people in the ministry and in all of our partner organizations, on behalf of publicly funded education. I hope to continue to contribute to this work in my OISE role as well, and look forward to continued collaboration with many of you.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Levin". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ben Levin