DEAR COLLEAGUES,

It is a pleasure to write to you again at the beginning of another spring, especially since, thanks to Minister Wynne’s efforts, we have already been able to announce the 2007–08 funding to boards. In this last message to you as deputy minister, I want to reflect on our accomplishments and next steps.

I am also very pleased to inform you that the government has appointed Dr. Philip Steenkamp, Deputy Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities, to be acting Deputy Minister of Education while they complete the international competition for a new permanent deputy. Philip was also a deputy minister of several portfolios in British Columbia. You will find him knowledgeable, thoughtful, and smart and an excellent colleague. The strong team in the Ministry of Education will continue to work closely with you to advance our shared positive agenda for education in Ontario.

What we have done and why it has worked
I’ve been able on many occasions to talk with you and other partners about how much positive change there has been in education in Ontario in the past few years. As I said in my December letter, pretty well every indicator we have is moving in the right direction. More than this, there is, in my view, an enormous amount of positive spirit and energy in our schools, which is what will sustain us into the future. I think it would be hard to find another jurisdiction anywhere that has more to be proud of in public education than we have today in Ontario. This is clearly a tribute to many thousands of people who have worked hard, and effectively, on behalf of our students and communities.
It’s worth reflecting on how we have together been able to accomplish so much. The following are some of what I take to be the key elements of our success:

- a strong focus everywhere on success for students – “success” meaning more than just test results or short-term achievement measures
- effective team leadership in schools, boards, and the ministry
- respect for diverse views among the parties, and a commitment to resolving differences through dialogue
- an approach to policy and practice that is based on research and evidence
- building on and sharing the many excellent practices and ideas in Ontario schools
- respect for professional skills, and giving people flexibility in the routes they choose to achieve goals
- investment in building capacity at all levels and among all parties
- seeing students, parents, and the broader community as vital partners in the work of education
- additional resources targeted to meeting key commitments

When you think of it this way, our collective achievement is even more impressive, because changing the way we work will continue to lead to better results in the future as well.

**Next steps**

The work of education is never completed; there is always more to learn and to do. As we accomplish more, we also expect more of ourselves and others. So it is no diminishment of all that has been done to mention some of the challenges that still lie ahead.

Have we even come close to the true ceiling of what our students could accomplish under the right conditions? To me, everything in the history of education says we have not. Some of you will have heard me say that the history of education is in part a history of amazing accomplishment and in part a history of failing to see what was truly possible. Just as most records of human achievement get surpassed on a regular basis (think of the 4-minute mile or the 10-second 100-yard sprint), in education too each time we reach a new plateau of achievement, we see that in fact...
more could be done. Limitations that were taken for granted a few decades ago – for example, that completion of high school was only for a small portion of students – are now known to be entirely wrong. Recently I met with the leadership of the Singapore Ministry of Education. They too are worried about high school graduation rates and have set a goal of reducing their dropout rate by half – from 3% to 1.5%! Now there is an ambitious target, yet they believe it is attainable.

It must be clear to all of us that there is still plenty of talent in Ontario that we are not fully engaging or capturing. This means there is more work to do towards continued progress in literacy and numeracy, in character education, in increasing high school graduation rates, in better outcomes for special education students, in engaging parents and the community, in supporting English and French language learners, and so on. The good news is that we have a very strong foundation in all these areas on which to build.

**Director leadership**

You know that directors of education play a key leadership role in Ontario. Many directors are highly engaged in the work of board and community leadership, often extending their work beyond the traditional bounds of education. When you speak, people listen. I hope and trust you will continue to be advocates for publicly funded education and for the public good more broadly on related issues, such as early childhood development, strong families, and social systems that support individual and community development.

I also urge you to play this role collectively in the province. There is much that directors of education could do beyond the boundaries of your individual boards to help support informed public dialogue on important issues, and to help increase public confidence in our education system. I know how busy you already are in your own boards, yet I hope you will find a way to play a more central role as a group on the provincial educational scene.
Updates

• **Grants for student needs.** You have already received considerable information about the 2007–08 grants, and I have communicated with you often on funding issues, so I will not say very much here. Just as we recognize that boards do their best to make good choices among many worthwhile competing priorities, I know you will recognize the efforts the government has made to provide appropriate funds to the education system in light of all the other pressures on its finances.

• **Primary class size reductions.** The class size plans we are seeing from many boards are highly positive. They show that, in the fall of this year, in most boards, nearly 90 per cent of primary classes will have twenty or fewer students. Thank you to you and your teams for your work in helping to fulfil a commitment that is very important to teachers, parents, and students, and therefore important for maintaining public confidence in education. We recognize the challenges in implementation that boards faced because of a range of factors, and appreciate your efforts to make this happen.

• **Transportation reviews.** The transportation review consultants have completed the first four transportation consortium reviews. Their reports are in the final stages and we should be sharing them shortly with boards. The briefings I’ve had indicate that all boards will find the reports useful, since the consultants are able to identify significant strengths and areas for improvement in current arrangements. As you know, we do have additional funds put aside, both in 2006–07 and for 2007–08, to respond to the findings of these reviews. We are in discussions now with boards about the next set of reviews.

• **Conflict mediation support.** One of the recommendations of the working table on special education was to provide more support to schools and boards for resolving conflicts with parents on special education issues. Good conflict resolution skills have been shown to reduce problems in this area. The ministry is organizing
regional events for schools and boards that we believe will help build more productive relationships and reduce conflicts.

- **“Prohibitive to repair” projects.** The “prohibitive to repair” program is providing funds to remove or replace a substantial number of schools that are no longer in reasonable condition and either cannot or should not be renovated. The identification of the first capital projects under this policy is proceeding. The process is complicated because in most cases, owing to changes in demography, the best solution is not a simple replacement of an existing school. Our staff are in contact with many boards about your proposals. Each situation is different, so we appreciate your cooperation as we examine these in order to make appropriate recommendations to the Minister.

- **Improving use of capital facilities.** The Premier and Minister have both spoken publicly about the importance of making the best possible use of school buildings across the province. In some cases this will mean making a school that is not needed in one board available to a coterminous board that could make use of the building. Our current processes do not always encourage this kind of effective use of existing public facilities. The ministry will be working with boards, where appropriate, to try to facilitate capital solutions that are most efficient for the public purse, since money tied up unnecessarily in facilities cannot be used for other purposes, such as program costs.

- **The Curriculum Council.** The government has recently announced the formation of the Curriculum Council, as promised in its 2003 education platform. The council is being chaired by Dr. Dennis Thiessen of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. It will provide an independent voice on curriculum issues referred to it by the Minister. The council will also consult with stakeholders and the public as appropriate. The first issue on the council’s agenda is the appropriate place in the curriculum for environmental issues. Dr. Roberta Bondar is chairing the working group examining this issue.
• **Aboriginal education.** I am very pleased with the increasing number of boards that are developing targeted strategies to close the achievement gap for Aboriginal students. At least twenty-three boards so far are developing a confidential and voluntary self-identification policy for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students. A resource guide sharing best practices in developing and implementing such a policy will be released in mid-April. In addition to the $10 million enhancement announced in the 2007–08 GSN with the introduction of a First Nation, Métis, and Inuit education supplement, $6 million of ongoing funding outside GSN has been announced as part of the provincial budget. The ministry’s Aboriginal Education Office and Curriculum and Assessment Policy Branch will be working actively in developing classroom resources for teachers for the next school year in this area.

• **Commitments on reporting and professional development.** In my last letter, I mentioned that the ministry would issue this spring both a calendar of ministry reporting requirements and a calendar of professional development activities planned by the ministry. Both of these are in active development, and we should be able to have these to you well before the end of the school year to assist you in your planning for next year.

• **OnSIS.** I want to thank you for the very substantial efforts you and your teams have made to meet the requirements of OnSIS. About 98 per cent of schools are now signed off for the 2005–06 school year, which was the most challenging task because of the need to reconcile the new and Legacy data systems at the same time as we were working out various challenges of hardware and software. I know this meant many long hours for your staff, and some frustrations with system delays and other problems. I know also that ministry staff worked very, very hard to support you and to respond to your concerns and problems. We are now in a position to have a high level of confidence in a system that will yield much better data with less work than the old system could. For 2006–07 the task will be easier since there is no reconciliation to previous systems, and we have also taken steps to remedy a number of system problems that we faced over the past few months. Please accept
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**Ministry team.** It has been my pleasure to work with a tremendously capable management team in the ministry. Avis Glaze, our Chief Student Achievement Officer and head of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, and assistant deputy ministers George Zegarac, Nancy Naylor, Dominic Giroux, and Aryeh Gitterman are the ones who interact most directly with boards. They and their directors and staff have been completely committed to the same goals as you – improved student outcomes, reduced inequities in outcomes, and increased public confidence – and they have acted in ways highly consistent with the “key elements” I mentioned earlier in this letter.

Many of you will know that Aryeh Gitterman has recently moved to take on an important role in the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. I am very pleased that Barry Pervin, whom most of you will know from his important work on our leadership agenda, will be acting Assistant Deputy Minister for this portfolio, which includes, among other things, safe and healthy schools, information management (OnSIS/MISA), leadership development, and teaching policy issues.

I have been privileged to have the opportunity to participate as deputy minister in years of extraordinary progress in education in Ontario. As I hope I have consistently conveyed, this progress has only occurred because of the efforts of so many people in our boards and schools and communities, as well as in the ministry. Directors of education have been vital allies, as well as, when appropriate, “critical friends” in this work. Much has been done, and, as always in education, much remains to be done. I look forward to continuing to support Ontario’s education system in my new role.
Please accept my deep gratitude for your professionalism, candour, and just plain hard work for a cause we all know is as important as anything to which we could possibly dedicate ourselves.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Ben Levin
Deputy Minister of Education