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Not only are results improving, but some of the gaps in results are decreasing.

DEAR COLLEAGUES,

I am pleased once again to share with you some perspectives on the current status of public education in Ontario and future challenges. The central message I want to convey is that we have witnessed very substantial progress on many fronts, but that important challenges still remain in the months ahead.

Current status

We have a great deal to be proud of in public education in Ontario. We are one of the few jurisdictions in the world that can show significant progress on every important education indicator over the past three years. Here are some examples:

- In EQAO results, achievement on all indicators rose in 2006–07 for the third year in a row. Since 2003 the percentage of students who reach level 3 in Grade 6 reading – one key benchmark – is up 10 points (from 54% to 64%), which means that 18% more students are now reaching the standard. OSSLT results have improved, as have Grade 9 math results. And these are not just artefacts of the tests; as I visit schools I hear from teachers that they are seeing real improvements in students’ skills.

- Not only are results improving, but some of the gaps in results are decreasing. The number of schools in Ontario with very low results (below 34%) has dropped by nearly three-quarters.

- The French-language sector has been particularly successful in improving student achievement. French-language students have reached the 75% target in Grade 6 math, while French-language girls have reached the target in all Grade 6 assessments.

- High school graduation rates have also risen for the past two years, and our preliminary evidence is that they rose again in 2005–06. Credit accumulation in Grades 9 and 10 is also improving.
Teacher attrition is down, a sign of good morale. Keeping skilled people in the profession is an important gain for students.

While our results are improving, there is still much more to be done.

- Teacher attrition is down, a sign of good morale. As reported by the Ontario College of Teachers, substantially fewer teachers are leaving the profession in their first few years, and ministry data also show that fewer teachers are taking retirement at the first opportunity. Keeping skilled people in the profession is clearly an important gain for students.

- Primary class sizes are decreasing significantly. More than 60% of such classes are now at 20 or fewer students, and more than 90% of primary classes are at fewer than 23 students.

- The ministry’s information is that private school enrolment did not increase in 2004–05 for the first time in many years.

These are very significant accomplishments. We should be proud of them and we should be telling the public about them. Wherever I go around the province, I give this message to educators and thank them for the hard work that is producing these results.

**Challenges for 2006–07**

We are all aware that 2007 is an election year in Ontario. This will bring a higher degree of scrutiny of education issues since these are among the government’s highest priorities. An election also has the potential to increase the pressure all of us face on what we might call “distractions” – issues that are not necessarily centrally related to student outcomes, but that have the potential to gain public prominence perhaps at the expense of more important things. This will make it even more important for us who are in leadership roles to stay focused on the things we know do matter to students.

While our results are improving, there is still much more to be done. One of the key goals in the ministry’s Strategic Directions is to reduce the gaps in student achievement. We need to enhance our efforts with boys, ESL students, Aboriginal students, students from some minority groups, and students in special education programs. While the number of schools in Ontario with very low results has dropped significantly, we haven’t succeeded yet in narrowing the gap between boards with the highest student achievement and boards with the lowest student achievement.
We intend to reduce the number of reports we require from boards and to have a single schedule that everyone knows in advance.

We can only be successful in our work if all partners understand and are committed to our goals and strategies.

A related challenge in 2006–07 for the ministry – and I suspect also for many boards – is to improve our own alignment and coherence. Many directors have rightly reminded me that the ministry continues to hold too many separate events, issue too many separate communications, and require too many separate reports from boards, and these requirements get in the way of your focus. My colleagues and I accept this as a fair criticism and are committed to doing better. Accordingly, I am committing the ministry to the following actions:

- This spring – I hope by early May – the ministry will issue a professional development calendar for 2007–08. This will list major professional development events proposed by the ministry (those with provincial scope involving significant numbers of teachers, principals, or supervisory officers) for the coming school year. This is intended to help boards with your PD planning.

- Similarly, we propose to issue before the end of the school year a single calendar of ministry reporting requirements, both financial and program, for 2007–08. We intend to reduce the number of reports we require from boards and to have a single schedule that everyone knows in advance. (The recent change made to special education plans is one instance of this effort.)

- As a third commitment in this area, there will be few, if any, new funding offers in the last quarter of our fiscal year that require applications or separate reporting from boards. You have consistently told me that short-term offers of funds for specific purposes are not useful, so we will have very few, if any, in the remainder of 2006–07.

Another critical area of attention this year has to be building and maintaining effective partnerships. We can only be successful in our work if all partners – students, parents, teachers, support staff, principals, supervisory officers, and others – understand and are committed to our goals and strategies. It is so easy to feel that others are not on side, or are taking wrong actions and positions. Yet oppositional stances will not help any of us, so we must make a continuous effort to build bridges and understanding – to recognize and respect the views and concerns of others while still maintaining fidelity to our primary purposes concerning student outcomes.
Finally, it will be important to have a continued focus on communication. As I indicated in my August letter to you, we have much still to do, so that our colleagues in the schools as well as parents and the broader public have a clear sense of how much progress has been made. Principals, teachers, and support staff are highly credible ambassadors for public education, which means we have to be sure that our staff know what is happening and are in a position to tell others about it.

**Updates**
The following paragraphs update you on a few of the many initiatives currently under way in Ontario. Other important areas, such as special education, have been addressed in recent letters to you so are not repeated here.

- **Bill 52 on Learning to 18/Student Success.** Bill 52, the legislation on Learning to 18 and Student Success, has now been approved by the Legislature. This Bill has been the subject of considerable attention, as some groups have expressed concerns that the Bill will lower standards or result in privatization of education. I can say with complete assurance that the Learning to 18 strategy has precisely the opposite purpose. We are intent on providing significant and meaningful learning opportunities to students in a way that builds and sustains public confidence in publicly funded education.

One part of the Student Success initiative permits students to benefit from what we are calling "equivalent learning". Students would be able, while still in high school, to participate in some college and university courses (as is already the case in some other provinces and in many parts of the United States). The ministry would also identify a small number of carefully selected high-quality experiences, such as 4H, that could be provided outside the school system and that students would be able to import for up to 2 high school credits, just as is now the case with advanced certification from certain conservatories of music. In addition, we would like to provide an opportunity for students in Ontario who already speak, read, and write an international language to be able to earn a credit for their language skills, just as they
would for a language program taught in a high school. As Bill 52 clearly indicates, these programs would be put into place in ways that preserve the integrity and centrality of the publicly funded education system. All equivalent learning would have to meet high standards appropriate for high school programs. When such initiatives are put into practice, we would evaluate them carefully over the next two or three years to assess the degree to which they meet these goals.

While equivalent learning is an important part of our overall Student Success Strategy, the strategy includes far more. The most important factor in achieving higher graduation rates will continue to be an unrelenting focus on student success in our high schools, leading to appropriate changes in teaching practices and student support that can make that success possible.

I want to pay tribute to the outstanding work of your Student Success leaders in moving this initiative forward. In response to questions from some directors, I can assure you that the ministry will continue to fund Student Success leader positions in boards.

- **Research.** I recently wrote to all directors and other stakeholders with an update on our research strategy. I believe deeply that our policy and practice should be based on the best available knowledge and evidence. A number of boards have done some wonderful work in using research to support larger improvement strategies, and I believe our provincial strategy will support such progress more generally. As noted in the letter, I have appointed Dr. Carol Campbell as the ministry’s first Chief Research Officer to ensure that our research strategy moves forward more strongly and rapidly. I have asked Carol specifically to ensure that we commission, as rapidly as possible, external third-party evaluations of our three key priorities – literacy/numeracy, Learning to 18, and primary class size reduction – so that there is an independent public voice on what we have done. She will also help focus our research dissemination work so that the ministry can play a leadership role in bringing relevant and high-quality research to the attention of all those who might have an interest in it – in and beyond the education sector.
The commitment to smaller classes for primary students is an important part of the government’s overall program.

The ministry will be making further changes to the funding formula in 2007–08.

- **Working with boards and trustees.** Over the next few weeks, the ministry is organizing, in cooperation with the trustee associations, a series of orientation sessions for new and experienced trustees. In addition, on December 14, Minister Wynne is meeting with the chairpersons of the 72 boards. A prime focus of these sessions will be to engage trustees on issues of student achievement so that boards can focus on this as a key part of their responsibilities. There were significant changes in the make-up of a number of boards in the November elections, which present both an opportunity and a challenge for directors to help build a strong team of trustees who are focused on improving student learning.

- **Primary class size.** You will all have received recently from Nancy Naylor an outline of our plans to achieve the government’s target of a maximum of 20 students in primary classes. I recognize, as does the Minister, that full implementation of this commitment in your schools brings some significant operational challenges. Nancy and her colleagues want to work closely with you and your teams to support this initiative, as do I. At the same time, we should all recognize that the commitment to smaller classes for primary students is an important part of the government’s overall program, and one that has strong public support, so its effective management is an important part of retaining and building public confidence, which is essential to all of us.

- **Funding formula.** The Minister has written to boards and other stakeholders inviting comments and proposals on improvements to the funding formula. Liz Sandals, the Minister’s Parliamentary Assistant, is chairing a series of meetings with various groups to look at issues and options. As we have done in each of the past three years, the ministry will be making further changes to the funding formula in 2007–08 to ensure that it embodies effectively the government’s policy goals and also recognizes pressures on boards. In addition, the Minister is intent on making the grant information available to boards much earlier in the year. To this end Nancy Naylor has already written to you, outlining many of the key planning parameters for 2007–08 so that you have the information you need for your budget process.
We all need to keep in mind that this government has, during its time in office, provided the largest infusion of new resources to public education in many years, at a time when enrolment continues to decline and amidst fierce competing pressures for spending in other areas as well as tax cuts. A couple of examples of the size of that investment are appended to this letter (see page 10), including not only support for new commitments such as reducing primary class size or maintaining existing staffing, but also the addition of thousands of new positions even while overall enrolment continues to decline.

I also want to comment on the often-stated need to “fix” the funding formula. This wording implies that the central problem is the way the funds are allocated, and that we could find an alternative way to distribute existing funds that would meet everyone’s requirements. The suggestions being made to us, however, are almost all calls for additional funding for a range of purposes. Nobody has yet suggested that there is surplus money somewhere in the formula that should be reallocated to higher priorities. It is certainly legitimate to argue that spending on public education should increase even more rapidly than it has in the past three years, but we may not be contributing to clear public understanding and choices if we use phrases such as “fixing the funding formula” when what is really wanted is more money overall.

• Capital. The past few years have seen significant progress in renewal of capital facilities. Ontario has built many new schools in the past decade and our older schools are in substantially better condition than they were a few years ago because of the infusion of additional funds for renovations and repairs. The ministry has now released guidelines on school accommodation reviews and on our program to replace “prohibitive to repair” schools. We will be working closely with boards in the coming months to ensure that our capital programs complement and support your long-term capital plans, so that you can move forward with renovation, building, and consolidation, as appropriate to each board’s circumstances. We are putting in place a long-term plan that recognizes the need for access to French-language schools for those with rights to French-language education.
While good physical facilities are an important element in effective schooling, we also want to be sure that we are not using more resources than we need to for buildings, given the many other areas in which funds could be used to support student learning. As an example of improved efficiency concerning capital, we are moving to have boards’ capital borrowing provided by the Ontario Financing Authority, rather than through individual or collective board issues. This change would save the sector a significant amount each year in interest costs.

• **OnSIS, MISA, and data.** All of us are aware of the importance of reliable, timely data to support our planning and decision making. Many boards are doing exciting work in the area of effective use of data to support school planning. At the provincial level, new information systems for Ontario education are badly needed but are also a very large undertaking that I know is putting pressure on boards even as we recognize its importance. The long-term benefits are clear, however. OnSIS is already providing us with data that used to be collected through separate processes requiring additional work by boards. For example, data on student success that currently requires a separate data-gathering process will come through OnSIS starting next year. Also, MISA will provide boards with access to information collected through OnSIS, so that schools and boards have better information for decision making.

The ministry has recognized that having data is not enough – which is why we have provided substantial funding in the past couple of years through MISA for effective management and use of data in schools and boards. In fact, in 2006–07 we increased the budgeted MISA allocation to boards in recognition of the pressures on you. While I cannot make a specific commitment for future years, I can say that the ministry is fully aware of the need to continue to support boards’ capacity to use data effectively. It would be foolish of us to spend large amounts of money to this end without making efforts to ensure we get full value from it.

• **Senior ministry staff.** David Fulford has joined the ministry as Assistant Deputy Minister for Corporate Services and Chief Administrative Officer. David was
previously responsible for leading the implementation of a new financial reporting system for the Ontario government.

There are no other new appointments at the director or assistant deputy minister level since my August message. However, responsibility for the Labour Relations and Governance Branch, lead by Margot Trevelyan, as well as the Provincial Stability Secretariat, lead by Renu Kulendran, was transferred in September from Nancy Naylor to Dominic Giroux.

I thank all of you and your teams for your great work, and extend my best wishes to everyone for a happy holiday season.

Sincerely,

Ben Levin
Deputy Minister of Education
Multi-year History of School Board Funding vs. Enrolment from 1987 to 2006-07

Per Pupil Funding vs. Enrolment from 1987 to 2006-07


NOTES
1. These charts exclude the funding for non-credit Adult ESL/FSL from 1998-99 onward.
2. Figures for 1998-99 and following years on school year basis.
3. Figures for 1997 and prior years on calendar year basis.
4. Unallocated funding in 2006-07 includes funding for trustee remuneration, capital programs, and other funding.
5. 2005-06 Revised Estimates include adjustment to the high needs amount of special education.
6. Exclude funding for the Teachers’ Pension Plan.
7. Provincial total includes school authorities.