Memorandum To: Directors of Education

From: George Zegarac
Deputy Minister

Date: January 20, 2016

Subject: Emerging from the pause: Working together for the remainder of the 2015-16 school year

Allow me to take this opportunity to wish you all a very happy new year! I am looking forward to the progress we will make together on our shared vision in 2016.

As we transition out of the collective bargaining period – during which we paused on most regular business at the request of Directors of Education in order to support their focus on the needs of their schools and classrooms – we now have an opportunity to look at how we work with our partners, to examine how our models and modes of engagement and collaboration fit within the current context.

While acknowledging the need to be flexible to potential future changes that may arise from our work together, I have provided my staff with the following direction for emerging from the pause:

- There will be no ministry-led events in January 2016. We will also continue to maintain our policy of no events held on Mondays.

- For the remainder of the 2015-16 school year, the ministry will host only a few signature face-to-face events for board leadership teams, with all other engagement moving to virtual and optional wherever possible. (with the exception of scheduled training opportunities to assist with the arrival of Syrian newcomers).

- Visits with boards will continue to proceed only when requested by board directors.

- Advisory committees, working tables and other fora that only engage a small number of people will continue in order to maintain open channels of expert advice to the ministry.

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Future work and engagement that may arise from government direction will proceed as required – but will be done with consultation between the ministry and partners about effective and coherent implementation.

EPO 2015-16 school-year contracts will not be extended beyond the normal time period. Staff will work with their respective board contacts to determine if existing contracts can be delivered within the 2015-16 school year, or if contracts need to be adjusted to reflect what can be carried out given the disruption. All expenditures related to the 2015-16 school year need to be incurred before the end of August 2016. Any unspent funds will be returned to the ministry per existing procedures.

As promised, the ministry will work with boards to review extraordinary costs incurred as a result of strike/work-to-rule activity in the 2015-16 school year. We will provide more information on this issue shortly.

I had many opportunities throughout the fall to talk with you about this work, and heard a shared sense of optimism about continuing to transform our system in collaborative ways that leverage all of our strengths and address all of our needs. We have a history of success to build upon in Ontario. Our publicly funded early years and education system is among the best in the world. And we are determined to build on this great work in order to continue to strengthen our organizational cultures to sustain the highest levels of collaborative professionalism and expertise. The direction we are going – and now accelerating toward – is possible because of your commitment. I am asking you to make a continued commitment – as our ministry also does – to strengthening our partnerships to support the highest levels of collaborative professionalism and expertise.

Our renewed vision is a deeply shared one that we built together and reflects input from across the province. This vision talks about transformation happening at all levels of the system, and with the dedication and contribution of all partners. The responsibility for making this vision a reality is collective; it will take shared leadership and accountability to implement the long term strategies and approaches that will guide achievement and well-being at all levels of the system.

Our focus, together, lies in becoming more differentiated, more flexible, and more adept at operating on a need-driven basis. We are also ready to revisit and rebalance our measures of accountability and transparency. As a ministry, we recognize the need to accelerate the transformation in how we collaborate with our partners. We want the pursuit of our priorities to reflect these guiding goals and principles.

We will continue to plan opportunities to hear from you, and I encourage us all to engage in honest, constructive conversations as our work evolves. There are no simple road maps to success; our work is complex, important and constantly evolving. As we explore new approaches to working together in support of our learners, we must have some tolerance for ambiguity and experimentation, and a willingness to practice – and then refine our practice.
We intend to engage with school boards and partners both formally and informally on moving forward, with high expectations for ourselves and a commitment to improvement for our own respective areas as well as for the provincial system as a whole. I know our organizations are full of capable and experienced professionals who care deeply about this work, so I want to continue to hear your voice about what success could and should look like.

However, while the nature of some of our work may change, our priorities do not.

We will continue to strengthen focus on our renewed goals as reflected in *Achieving Excellence*:

- **Achieving Excellence**
- **Ensuring Equity**
- **Promoting Well-Being**
- **Enhancing Public Confidence**

In the next year, I also expect we will continue to deepen our work in the following areas you have told us are important to you:

- **Early years and child care modernization**: further integrating and increasing accessibility to programs and supports for children and families
- **Math**: implementing a renewed Math Strategy that enhances access to resources for educators and parents, and supports professional learning for principals and teachers
- **Global competencies and experiential learning**: providing learners with engaging, hands-on, practical learning opportunities via innovative teaching practices and instructional methods enabled by technology
- **Equity**: continuing to support increased achievement and well-being for Aboriginal learners, children and youth in care, and children with special education needs

Across all of this work, we know that supporting a culture of collaborative professionalism and leadership is integral to making progress on all of our work, and to how we intend to work differently in the ministry and with our partners. We will also be working with partners, at tables and elsewhere, on planning for 2016-17 in ways that will have us make further progress in “targeting for impact”. I appreciate all of your efforts to be responsive, innovative and collaborative as we work together to evolve the next stage of our improvement journey. It is this capacity for shared responsibility, innovative delivery approaches and steadfast commitment to learners that makes our province’s early years and education system so successful.
I am sure that you are as excited as I am to be moving on the journey from great to excellent as we begin this New Year. I look forward to continuing our joint efforts towards implementing the goals of Achieving Excellence.

Sincerely,

George Zegarac  
Deputy Minister  
c: Council of Ontario Directors of Education