September 23, 2009

Dear Directors of Education,

I’m glad I had the opportunity to speak with most of you at the August 21st CODE meeting and the CODELF meeting of September 18th. With the frenetic pace of the first few weeks of the school year behind us, I want to connect with you again to reaffirm the positive changes that we will work together on to keep improving Ontario’s publicly funded education system.

Student Engagement Strategy – Student Voice Initiative
In the coming weeks, we will be opening applications for SpeakUp projects, as part of the Student Voice initiative. The goal of this initiative is to re-engage students and to close the gap in the achievement for students who are not yet experiencing success by learning more about how they learn and what helps them learn.

There are three main components of the program: Minister’s Student Advisory Council (MSAC), student-led SpeakUp projects and regional student forums. The proposed long-term outcome of Student Voice is increased student achievement, increased sense of belonging supported by a cultural norm that seeks, listens and responds to student voice. I would ask each of you to encourage your schools to get involved.

Parent Engagement
We are all aware of how important parent engagement is to student achievement, and we also know that the relationship between parents and their children’s school impacts everything we do.

This government has been working hard to strengthen parent involvement since coming into office, and we are committed to continuing to increase parent involvement in our schools.

Strong and effective engagement begins with parents supporting parents at the local level. Consistent with this approach, we will be refocusing our resources where they will have the most significant impact, by strengthening the role of Parent Involvement Committees (PICs). If Bill 177 is passed, it will require that every board in the province has a PIC, reinforcing the vital link between schools and parents.

We’ve also been supporting parent involvement through the Ministry of Education’s Parents Reaching Out (PRO) grants. Applications for PRO grants were made available in May of this year rather than in September — more than three months earlier than last year. The application deadline of October 16, 2009 is just around the corner.

EQAO
As you are aware, the EQAO results were recently released. Thousands more Ontario students in Grades 3 and 6 are achieving the provincial standard in reading, writing and math on provincewide tests than ever before. Overall, 67 per cent of students are achieving the provincial standard in Grades 3 and 6 combined, up 13 percentage points compared to 2002-03.
EQAO is not meant to replace the regular daily assessments done by teachers to evaluate student achievement, however, these test scores are key indicators of the health of our system and will help us continue to make improvements in student outcomes through our core priorities. It also shows that educators, students and parents have worked hard, and that this positive trend has caused other jurisdictions to pay attention to Ontario’s successful education strategies. Ministry of Education staff in the Student Achievement Division, under the direction of Mary Jean Gallagher, will continue to work with boards and schools to support improving student outcomes.

At the secondary level, more students are achieving at the provincial standard in both academic and applied mathematics. This year 77 per cent of those in academic mathematics achieved the provincial standard, an increase of 2 percentage points from last year and the rate for applied mathematics rose to 38 per cent, an increase of 4 percentage points from last year. The percentage of first-time eligible students who passed the Grade 10 Literacy test has increased to an all time high of 85 per cent.

Early Learning
Since the release of Dr. Pascal’s report, Ontario’s plans for early learning have garnered a great deal of attention from stakeholders and the media.

Premier Dalton McGuinty has reiterated publicly that the government remains committed to a phased implementation of full-day learning for four- and five-year-olds, starting in September 2010. We are mindful that registration for September 2010 will start as early as January in a large number of schools and we will work with you to ensure that we can meet those deadlines. We hope to begin the planning process with you in the fall.

Governance
As you know, Bill 177 is currently before the House. If passed, the legislation would clarify your role as well as the roles of individual trustees and board chairs. It would also add new duties around reviewing and reporting on multi-year plans with the board and establishing audit committees. The intention is to help keep boards focused on the primary goals of student achievement and wellbeing.

As I mentioned at the CODE meeting, the government has also stated its intention to file a provincial interest regulation. Drafting a provincial interest regulation is one of several initiatives the government is undertaking to strengthen school board governance and clarify the duties and responsibilities of boards. The regulation would also support the public’s expectation to see the significant investments we have made in education paying off in higher student achievement.

Rest assured that we know the vast majority of boards are doing well — they are governing themselves effectively and are demonstrating improvement in student achievement. We do, however, need to have mechanisms in place that would allow the government to deal with the rare instance where, over a long period of time, a board fails to make progress or where student achievement declines despite ongoing ministry support.

I think this is also an opportunity to demonstrate good return on investment to the public and other stakeholders and build public confidence in the education system.

Right to Attend
I also wanted to take this opportunity, as we welcome back returning students as well as those new to the system, to remind you about section 49.1 of the Ontario Education Act. All children, including those without immigration status in Canada, should attend Ontario publicly funded schools. Ours is a system that embraces all Ontarians, especially newcomers. This is consistent with our goal to reach every student, regardless of his or her personal circumstances.
**Changes in the Ministry**

Over the last year, you know there have been some changes to the Ministry’s organization, beginning with my appointment as Deputy Minister in July. I’m now sharing the most recent changes to keep you up-to-date.

Both Community Use of Schools and Parent Engagement now fall under the Instruction and Leadership Development Division, Barry Pervin, ADM. Community Use of Schools is now part of the Learning Environment Branch under Liz Harding’s direction and the Parent Engagement Office is part of the Inclusive Education Branch under Ruth Flynn’s direction.

As the school year begins I ask you to remind your colleagues that our focus should continue to be on improving student learning and achievement in order to strengthen Ontario’s future.

You should all take pride in your accomplishments. Thanks to your efforts Ontario students are making gains in their learning and achievement and being better prepared for their future than ever before.

All the best,

Kevin Costante
Deputy Minister of Education