

# The Virtuous Circle: The Good Politics of Improving Public Education

## Lessons from Ontario

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There is no doubt in my mind that an Ontario 18 year old young adult who finished high school this year is much better prepared to gain success in the global arena, due to reforms we began eight years ago. Her chance of going to university this fall is up dramatically, as is her likelihood of having a diploma at all (40% and 20% better respectively). Her relative improvement in prospects is higher still if she happens to come from a recently immigrated or a low income family, lives in a rural area, is a francophone<sup>1</sup> or has been identified with special education needs. The diploma itself has more meaning as her foundational skills in reading, writing and math are better, though perhaps not as strong as those graduating a few years behind her. Exposure to citizenship or character education means she already feels more connected to her community. There is a good but not yet great likelihood that she will be more physically fit and have healthier eating habits and she is guaranteed to have enjoyed more extracurricular activities through school. Her exposure to the arts and music is stronger. Chances are high that her feelings toward education are more positive owing to better motivated teachers, upgraded buildings and equipment and the virtual absence of labour strife.

As Minister of Education in Ontario starting in 2003 it was my privilege to oversee an ambi-

tious education reform agenda for just over 2 million school children and youth, 40% of Canada's total. Within three years, we were able to turn around a K-12 system widely perceived to have been in crisis. Student achievement, graduation rates, public and parent confidence, as well as teacher and other education staff morale were at all-time lows or stagnant and we were able to obtain unprecedented improvements in each. (Please see table 1). The objective success of the Ontario "*Excellence for All*" program has since been confirmed by external evaluations and by results in international testing. Progress for Ontario students has been sustainable and continues to grow into the present.

The fulfillment of these outcomes was due to a large number of people, and that wide ownership is ultimately the key to the story of Ontario education reform. It is also important to relate, however, that while the credit should be appropriately diffuse, the results do also line up closely with the specific targets we set out beforehand and promised to the public as part of the 2003 election campaign. It is possible for political actors to steer large scale education reform.<sup>2</sup>

Another key feature of the Ontario education advantage is that it was a "counter-reform" shaped in part by the experience of eight years of major, but ultimately failed, education reform efforts by the previous government.

The main difference between the back to back reform programs was not in content per se<sup>3</sup> but in the type of approaches followed. The former put exclusive emphasis on heavily prescriptive and centralizing changes to institutions, powers and policies as ends in themselves. Many of the measures were conflict driven and detracted resources and focus away from student needs. By contrast, and partly in reaction, we concerned ourselves with understanding and influencing the dynamics of the education system; how the various components (and the people within them) worked and could be made to work better together to generate the best outcomes in the classroom for students.

Our overarching goal for our Ontario education reform was to regain public confidence. We were galvanized by an alarming, accelerating flight of parents with means taking their children out of the public system to private schools, which saw a 44% enrolment increase in eight years. We were convinced the very future of a social consensus over high quality public education in our province was at stake unless we could deliver conspicuous results within a relatively short period of time.

There seemed to be a destructive cycle underway in Ontario education by 2003, where bad outcomes were leading to lowered public support and unwillingness to invest. We believed we could institute a *virtuous circle* wherein gains would lead to public support which would then permit us to act again for further gains. We recognized a significant opportunity for what some call “transformational leadership” to education by our party and government—where our actions could bring about increased motivation, morale, performance and ultimately, leadership taking, on the part of those in the system themselves. This was consistent with our perspective of Ontario education as a service oriented, heavily altruistic endeavour where dedicated people and institutions had become demoralized, unfocused and were underperforming. It was also founded on the inescapable reality that all senior government officials have to accept with some humility; all our grand

ambitions hinge on the fact that when the classroom door is closed, it is the teacher who will teach. If we were going to make progress then teachers, principals, education support workers, as well as parents and students, would have to be fully engaged.

We developed our insights in the course of three years of intensive interaction with the system while in opposition in the form of meetings, town halls and events by our Leader, now Premier, Dalton McGuinty, I as our Education Critic (or “shadow Minister”) and other members of our caucus. At almost every school we visited we found people with a clear view of how to address the challenges facing that school’s students, but either they lacked the permissions, the flexibility, or the resources. We also sought firsthand advice from experts in successful education reform.

There were five interrelated components to our *‘education reform through active leadership’* strategy. They were sequential in terms of introduction and emphasis but eventually all ran concurrently. First we set out and continuously reinforced a *vision for reform*. Secondly we took *calculated risks* to earn credibility with the public and within the sector. Third, we gave ourselves the capacity to *ensure implementation* of our outcomes. Fourth we worked to establish a *partnership based on respect*. Fifth, we attempted to *shift the culture to one of results and enterprising*.

### **Establish a Strong Sense of Vision**

Education reform needs a vision that engenders wide agreement and participation in its moral purpose. In Ontario we expressed it as the commitment for public education to deliver “excellence for all,” where every child would have the opportunity to do fully as well as their abilities and willingness to work could take them. This meant both higher achievement or ‘raising the bar,’ and ‘closing of the gap’ between higher and lower performing students. We struck a tone of urgency emphasizing the earlier each child’s individual needs were known, the better and potentially less expensive

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their progress would be to foster. We articulated a ten point student centred vision for reform that both elementary and secondary levels could relate to (please see appendix) together with measurable interim targets. While the statement reflected the overall ambition of the government for student achievement, the initial priority was literacy and numeracy:

- Every student in the province should be able to read, write, do math and comprehend at a high level by the age of 12 as the necessary foundation for later educational and social choices.

Everything we did in elementary education was related through this mission. For example, we positioned standardized testing as the means for the system to take into account the relative challenges and opportunities for each child by grade 3, by flowing resources and focus where they were needed the most, so that it would be acted upon by the time the child had completed grade 6. We added a secondary level goal as our next emphasis:

- Every student should receive a good outcome from publicly funded education, whether it is an apprenticeship, job placement, or admission to college or university.<sup>4</sup>

Together with our key officials I spent a full year outlining the reform mission directly to the parents, teachers, education support workers, principals, supervisory officers and others all over the province, always in interactive forums to try and gain commitment.<sup>5</sup> In doing so we established a beneficial frame for communication about education within the sector, with the public and the media.

### **Take Calculated Risks**

Ontario in the late 1990s and early 2000s had become an education battleground, marked by lockouts and strikes that cost 27 million learning days, and included the complete loss of high school extracurricular activities for nearly two years. The system had already undergone eight years of experimentation, budget cut-

backs and unhelpful scapegoating. The tone of education had to be changed quickly and dramatically.

The only sure way we could achieve that was through our actions. We not only set aggressive targets for student results with specific timetables but we put ourselves as the central government on the hook for their attainment. When asked what would happen if we didn't reach our objectives, we were clear: there would be a new Minister of Education and the Premier expected to pay a price at the polls.

In our first 'throne speech' (equivalent to a state of the union address), we positioned Mr. McGuinty's ambition to be the "Education Premier" and indicated education was our number one priority. When faced with a stark choice at the beginning of our mandate of backing away from either our education commitments or our pledge not to raise taxes due to an unexpected \$5.6 billion deficit, (after six months of searching for alternatives) we chose to raise taxes. In other words we acted preemptively by investing our political and funding capital at the front end so we could begin to earn the necessary trust and respect of the sector, and the interest and support of a cynical public. The almost immediate result was a significant "goodwill dividend," indicative in the early improvement to test scores even before many of our reform program elements were fully in place and by the thousands of teachers who took the voluntary upgrading we offered during the summer.

### **Embed Capacity for Implementation**

We knew from our examination of other education reform projects that we could not assume the system as configured would be able to implement the improvements we sought to make. Despite, or perhaps more accurately, because of, continual waves of previous reform the system was geared defensively, to go along with or even simply survive the latest measures. We had to take full responsibility for both the impact of the reform effort on the sector, and for build-

ing the capacity of the system to deliver. This required several key changes in the system from top to bottom and most specifically in schools.

To ensure a streamlined decision making capacity at the top of government we set up regular meetings of an unusual standing group of five to a maximum of ten people we termed the “guiding coalition”: the Premier, myself, our Special Advisor on Education, Michael Fullan, and our top bureaucrats and political staff. I likened this then to hot-wiring the system. It permitted a closely shared strategy and sent clear signals to the labyrinth of approval processes, keeping us relatively nimble for both initiatives and reactions.

Achieving coherency throughout the system in terms of roles and accountability is an act of reform in itself, by eliminating the “plausible deniability” that lives amid blurred responsibilities. To obtain coordination capacity at an education ministry (department) used to enforcing standards and rules we brought in some of the most accomplished practitioners from the field. For elementary we set them up in an action group called the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to work with school boards and schools, train teachers and analyse progress. We developed a Student Success group and network for secondary. We funded the corresponding senior coordinators for both at the school board level.

The real heart of our education reform was building capacity in the schools. Additional teachers and supplementary training for existing teachers were the most prominent elements of this new capacity. We added 1,100 primary teachers to lower class size alone. We trained and funded time for 16,000 Lead Teachers for literacy and numeracy—four for each elementary school in the province. We provided training upgrades to every elementary teacher. In secondary, we funded a new Student Success teacher in every one of the 835 high schools with a mandate to intercept struggling students from elementary schools and customize their supports. We also worked to free up the principal from administrative duties to gain more

time as instructional leader.

Reform measures cannot be undertaken in isolation from each other or from ongoing developments. A key part of managing for results was our capacity to proactively anticipate those other issues which, while not central to priority reform outcomes, had the potential to significantly distract. We considered ourselves fortunate for the periods when we could realize our goal, which was to spend half of our time on reform issues and the half on “all the rest.” A key tactic was to convert as much of the response to other issues to the benefit of reform priorities.

For example, the most significant ‘distractor’ issue in Ontario was the first ever expiration of all 122 teacher contracts across the province at the same time, a year into our mandate (a gift from our predecessors). By law we had no direct involvement in collective bargaining. Yet with one stroke our ability to afford the initiatives that were needed could be jeopardized. Just as importantly, without peace and stability we would not have a performance platform to deliver the results we had promised. Our solution was to create a first time “provincial dialogue” between ourselves with the teacher unions and school boards. We were able to intertwine elements of our reform agenda for student success and arrive at agreement templates that were implemented across the province, at a cost lower than the average for industrial settlements at the time.

Adequate funding is an essential part of the effectiveness of education reform. We increased our spending by about 8% per student per year after inflation in the course of the first four year period. Of this, about two-thirds or just under \$1 billion annually was devoted to increased student achievement and one-third to other needed improvements. Our overall spending was up by \$2.9 billion on education per year, while we also found about \$600 million in annual savings to put into priority areas.

The last part of our new capacity to be developed were the legal powers to intervene to protect student progress, which we declared a provincial interest along with financial matters

and student safety. Once we had established our bona fides to the sector and the public we passed legislation giving ourselves the ability to take over underperforming boards. We also used existing powers to protect funds, to suspend benefits and otherwise discipline outriders, but only as a last resort. Overall, we adopted an approach of “constructive accountability” that allowed us to use the right mix of incentives, transparency and finally pressure to obtain results. By not pre-judging the responsibility for problems we opened the door to more effective ways of solving them, and by emphasizing transparency for everyone we had a more powerful tool than simple punitive measures could provide.

### **Partnership based on respect**

The word partnership is frequently overused to the point of losing meaning. We determined that rescuing the concept and putting it in a sturdy framework within education was the key structural way to consolidate the longer term changes we were hoping to effect in the sector. We established a number of vehicles for input, shared problem solving and decision making. The centrepiece was an Education Partnership Table chaired by the Minister that meets quarterly, onto which we offered seats to the teachers, principals, education workers, school trustees, directors, students and parents as well as education non-profits and private sector education vendors. We required the groups to agree to mandate their representative to contribute perspective about the broad public interest in education, and not just the interests of their respective memberships. In return, we brought all new initiatives in education to the Partnership Table before they went to the Cabinet or the Legislature. We drafted policy papers and modified them based on the input received, often circulating them to the sector as a whole and sometimes setting up sub-groups or Working Tables. Every issue was then put into action in a timely manner. We also established other collaborative, power sharing mechanisms. One example was called the Provincial Stability Commission where teachers

and boards met to reduce reliance on formal, legal grievances and it brought the number of outstanding grievances down from over 800 to 40 within four months.

In Ontario partnership vehicles have been a way to keep the focus on student needs. They also have served to bring out sector professionalism, maximize benefit from sector expertise, and to save money, as well as to gain buy-in to initiatives and safely air out contentious issues.

### **Culture shift to one that values results and enterprising**

According to Maslow,<sup>6</sup> creativity, innovation and problem solving happen once an individual experiences security, confidence and self-esteem. Education systems prosper under similar conditions. In our campaign for education reform we had a simple mantra: “the new 3Rs of Ontario public education are Respect, Responsibility and Results.” Respect meant healthy attitudes between all groups in the sector including government, anchored by mutual regard for our mission on behalf of students, and by the public toward the sector. Responsibility was accountability for our individual roles and contributions as well as for the healthy well-being of the system as a whole. Results meant delivering conspicuous outcomes for students first of all, but also to demonstrate value to the taxpaying public at large, at a time when just one of four adults have a child in the public education system.

The purpose of our campaign was to cultivate a shared attitude open to new possibilities and to the enterprising we needed to take root at the school and board levels. By enterprising I mean the matching of great ideas with great implementation to realize improved outcomes. We devoted significant dollars to competitive funds for projects that would match the particular needs of schools and/or groups of students. We also funded the rapid transfer of proven ideas through lighthouse programs. When we identified underperforming schools, our first initiative was to offer the existing school team

the chance to fashion an improvement plan and access transitional resources. Only if they were unsuccessful did we then send in a turn-around team of experts, followed by personnel changes if improvement remained elusive.

For example, we used a device called 'statistical neighbours' to enable school teams to proactively compare themselves with other schools across the province who were serving similar student demographics, and provided resources for these schools to interact. We were aided in our quest for an enterprising culture by the unique makeup of the Ontario system as many parents effectively have choices of different school systems within public education that have to be paid attention to, particularly in a time of declining enrolment.

## Conclusion

The Ontario education reform experience offers a superior model for legislators and governments to consider in creating an international education advantage for their youth. It demonstrates that reform can be accomplished relatively rapidly and sustainably across a large system. Compared to high pressure/individual reward models, transformational leadership may seem more difficult to achieve and more risky for political and education leaders but the rewards for students are markedly higher. It is more suited to public education endeavour and has a relatively modest cost. The virtuous circle that can be achieved has not only educational benefits but political rewards that include but also transcend short term electoral credit.

People have enough anxiety about their own economic security than to have to worry about their youth being in the slow lane outpaced by those in other countries while their own education system is in conflict. If we can realize the needed improvements without crises, our energies are better spent fighting ignorance, and fighting for every child to be able to participate in and contribute to society as fully as possible as an adult.

There are many unknowns to each country's global challenge, and this includes the exact contribution that public education can make in meeting the challenge. What is certain is that improved public education has an important role to play and all political leaders will be held to account for making good choices in that regard.

- 1 As Avis Glaze ably relates in the detailed overview included in her paper for this conference, Ontario actually has four publicly funded education systems—a distinct public one and Catholic one for each of the majority English speaking and the minority franco-phone populations.
  - 2 It may be worth noting that in the Canadian political context the Minister, equivalent to a Secretary of Education, must be an elected representative and member of a Cabinet of Ministers with other portfolios reporting to the Premier who together exercise the executive power.
  - 3 All three of the different parties (New Democratic, Conservative and Liberal) successively in power in Ontario had unanimously agreed with the main findings of a major "Royal Commission on Learning" in 1995, including elements such as standardized testing and report cards, a professional body for teachers and a centralized formula for education funding.
  - 4 As in the US, but distinct from much of Europe, an unrealistically high number of Canadian parents (71%) want their children to go to university. While we raised enrolment to 40% from 28% of high school graduates, we also worked hard to re-orient expectations of both the system and parents to take the remaining 60% of students fully and fairly into account.
  - 5 We initiated an interactive email based group, OPEN or Ontario Public Education Network of people I signed up in person at engagements. It grew from about 6,000 people in opposition to 17,000 in government.
  - 6 Iconic American psychology professor Abraham Maslow focused on the positive attributes exhibited by higher performing individuals to support his propositions for a "hierarchy of needs" with respect to human potential and mental health and its application in management.
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## Appendix

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(Excerpt from)

# Building the Ontario Education Advantage: Student Achievement

April 29, 2004(v.3)

### A VISION FOR SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS

Our goal is to help develop the intellectual, emotional and physical potential of our children and young adults so they become the best contributing citizens they can be. We believe:

- Every student can learn;
- Every student can and should come to school ready to learn;
- Every student should learn in a school that is properly funded and in good repair;
- Every student in the province should be able to read, write, do math and comprehend at a high level by the age of 12 as the necessary foundation for later educational and social choices;
- Every student should have significant exposure to music and the arts;
- Every student should enjoy regular physical activity, appreciate a healthy lifestyle and have access to a full range of extracurricular activities;
- Every student should be safe and feel safe at school and in the schoolyard;
- Every student should reach the highest level of achievement that his or her ability and willingness to work hard will permit;
- Every student should receive a good outcome from publicly funded education, whether it is an apprenticeship, job placement, or admission to college or university; and
- Every student should know how to think for him or herself, appreciate the rights and obligations of good citizenship and learn about character values.

Each of these outcomes will be tied to specific, measurable results that the government is prepared to take responsibility for achieving.

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Table 1 – Ontario Education Reform Outcomes

Measure	Status 2003	Results to date	Pledge Made (If applicable)
Student achievement on standardized tests. (Avg % of students at provincial standard or "B" level. Reading and writing Gr. 3 & 6, Math for Gr. 3, 6, & 9 (Acad) Gr. 10 literacy (=pass)	57%  Flat for four previous years  72%	70% (2010)  Improved 15% by 2006 and 24% by 2010  84%	75% (2009)
Drop-out rates  Students leaving high school without diploma	32%  No change for 25 years then up significantly (6-8 points) due to curriculum change in 2000.	19% (2010)  Down 41%. Additional 171,000 students graduated.	15% (2012)
Public confidence	25%	65% (2006)	NA
Disruptions learning days lost to strikes and lockouts	27 million  In preceding 8 yrs	<10,000	Peace and stability
Private School enrolment	Up by 44%	Down by 12%	Reduce
Class sizes –primary Ratio of children in classes of 20 students or less	2 out of every 10	9+ out of every 10	Real cap of 20
University Enrolment Percent of previous year high school graduates	28%	40% up by 43%	NA
Teacher quality	Mandatory written test for new teachers. Re-certification for all teachers every 5 years with fixed refresher courses. In practice only applied to <1 in 6 teachers.	1 year new teacher probation induction/school mentorship and 2 full in class evaluations before certification.  Designated professional development by gov't.  Extensive re-training of all existing elementary teachers.  Cancelled re-certification.	Treat teachers with professional respect  Professionals support
Teacher attrition Left teaching in first five years of service	1 in 3 (2001)	<1 in 10 (2006)	NA
Low School performance  # 'low performing' schools (>50% of students not at provincial standard)	764  (of 4,020)	201 (2008)  Reduced by 74%	Will not allow any school to fail our kids  Turnaround teams for any school not measuring up