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Education Funding in Ontario - More Or Less?

Almost four years ago the people of Ontario chose a new government when it vaulted Dalton McGuinty's Liberals into power. For those in the education sector the change was embraced as a chance for peace and stability in a province that might again show respect for its educators. There was great hope for the years that lay ahead until the first "fixed date election" in October 2007.

There is no doubt that the current government has brought many positive changes to education. The validation comes from those outside Ontario who see this province as a place where government, school boards and schools are aligned for the same moral purpose of improving teaching and learning. There has never been a time in Ontario's history when such a singular goal has been articulated so clearly and consistently across the sector. This government, its Ministry of Education and our school boards should be applauded for achieving this common focus.

Yet as we approach this important election one can sense that this government's work is not so widely understood and appreciated by the general public. Despite the many achievements of their first term the government is receiving considerable attention for a financial crisis that is brewing in many school boards across the province. Each week's press clippings have more articles about funding pressure, staffing cuts and inadequate facilities. To some extent this is fairly predictable in the run up to any election no matter which party is in government. However one does not expect school board trustees to be the primary protagonists – especially after four years free from strikes and labour disruptions.

Perhaps the government is lucky that the election campaign seems destined to focus on the environment, economy and energy instead of health and education. Nevertheless the problems will be waiting for them should they receive the second mandate that many are predicting. So the obvious question is "What needs to be done about school funding?"

The perennial answer to this question is "more money". Despite the fact that enrolment declined by 2.4% (more if you don't count the handful of growth boards) and funding has increased by over 2 billion dollars during this government's term, the problem lies in a number of major expenditures like salary, benefits, teacher preparation time, special education, student transportation and capital construction. The Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA) noted that the recent increase in grants for salaries was accomplished through a realignment of other grants. OCSTA has recommended the funding for 2007-08 be set at the actual cost of employee salaries. In response to the government's rationale of declining enrolment OCSTA has pointed out that school-based expenditures do not

decline at the same rate as student enrolment. The same is true of transportation services. Where do you find a bus that shrinks when there are fewer students?

CPCO submitted thirty-seven recommendations in November 2006 to the Ministry on education funding. The recommendations are published in this issue. These recommendations are based on 1200 responses to a survey on the impact of funding at the school level. Following are some of the results of this survey.

In the area of literacy and numeracy 66% of the respondents reported improvement in both initiatives. At the secondary level 31% reported improvement in the student success initiatives. The government's anti-bullying initiative also had a positive impact for 62% of the respondents.

However, in special education 58% reported a negative impact on programs and 60% reported a negative impact on special education staff. By comparison 19% saw improvement in programs and 14% saw improvement in staffing.

On the subject of class size 65% reported improvement in primary grades but 37% reported negative impact on class size in both the junior and intermediate grades.

In the Arts 39% reported a negative impact on music programs compared to 10% who found improvement. By comparison 27% reported improvement in physical education since the Ministry launched the Quality Physical Education initiative.

In terms of school leadership 41% reported a negative impact on the number of vice-principals in the system. This is particularly important because 46.7% of the current school administrators are 51 years of age or older and 44% have indicated plans to retire by 2009. The loss of vice-principals will have a tremendous effect on the replacement of school principals.

It is apparent from these statistics that school boards are receiving extra support for government initiatives. The problem lies in the other areas that are mentioned above. Accordingly, school boards are asking for more money and flexibility to use funding where it is most needed.

Despite this dilemma there is much for which to be thankful. Student achievement has improved. Teacher morale has improved and thousands of young teachers are able and willing to take up the profession each year. For all that it has done this government deserves another mandate but it is imperative that funding problems be resolved quickly in a fair and reasonable way.