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First Term Report Card

As the school year winds down it is clear that Dalton McGuinty, the “education premier” has implemented many positive changes in the education sector. Three ministers and two deputy ministers later, it is evident that the research and efforts of Michael Fullan and Avis Glaze have formed the foundation of a focused, coherent and funded effort to improve student achievement in the elementary and secondary schools of the province.

The major initiatives of student achievement and character education are foundational pieces in a robust agenda that banked on meeting ambitious targets during the first term of the government. There has been a steady improvement in test results. On the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) website one can see three-year improvements in Reading (Gr. 3: 62%; Gr. 6: 64%), Writing (Gr. 3: 64%; Gr. 6: 61%) and Mathematics (Gr. 3: 68%; Gr. 6: 61%). The Grade 9 Math results have risen slightly to 71% for academic math but applied math is mired at 35% despite a 9% increase. The recent Gr. 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) had 84% of the students passing the test.

Educators and psychologists remain wary of isolating EQAO data as the sole performance indicator of system improvement. However, they agree on the importance of developing broader assessment strategies that include classroom-generated data in order to continue to improve student achievement. The enhancement of school-based practices is a credit to the work of Avis Glaze at the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and Marguerite Jackson at EQAO.

Funding remains a hot topic in our sector due to mounting financial pressures in school boards. In a recent presentation to the Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education (Peterborough, June 2007) Minister Wynne shared some current data. The Grant for School Needs (GSN) will be \$18.3 billion next year, an increase of \$781 million despite declining enrolment of approximately 50 000 students over the last five years. School boards will receive \$462 million to mitigate decreased grants caused by declining enrolment. The GSN will again include funding for a full-time principal and secretary in every school with more than 50 students. (Ed. Note: This has been a standing CPCO request since 2001.) The Supported Schools Allocation will provide additional funding for teacher staffing and school operations in rural school boards hit by enrolment losses. This step recognizes the CPCO view that schools are community hubs. Nine million dollars has been added to transportation grants so that revenues will not be lost when enrolment declines.

Minister Wynne was applauded for the government’s success in ensuring labour peace during its term. The parents were thanked for their response to the parent engagement initiative for which more than 2 800 applications were received. This caused the government to increase funding to \$2.5 million this year and to allocate more funds for next year. The loudest applause was for the Minister’s commitment to continue supporting Catholic education as one of the four publicly funded school systems. The recent statements of McGuinty and Wynne have reinforced this government’s plan to keep the current system moving forward.

CPCO has been monitoring the Ministry initiatives related to the Role of the Principal paper authored by former Minister Gerard Kennedy in 2003. Some twenty initiatives were identified in the paper and the majority have been initiated or completed. Among the most significant to principals is the streamlining of Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA) to a five-year cycle with reduced paper work. Associated with TPA is the New Teacher Induction Program with its focus on growth as CPCO had recommended.

The Minister’s Principal Reference Group has been active in providing field level feedback on Ministry initiatives. The Education Partnership Table expanded to four working tables plus the Student Success Commission. CPCO has active representatives on these committees who maintain frequent contact with the president and executive director. The Institute for Education Leadership has made significant strides in developing and embedding the role of principals as system leaders within a tri-level model that includes superintendents and directors. The major outstanding issue in the Role of the Principal paper is the development of regulations that will address standards for principals’ personal services contracts in the areas of dispute resolution and employment security.

There is much work left to do and a second-term is needed for McGuinty to finish the job. It would be a significant benefit to the future of Ontario if he was able to complete his education agenda. He is absolutely right that we live in a knowledge-based economy and that the key to Ontario’s prosperity is its education system. As educators we need to support his message that education is an investment rather than an expense. As Catholic educators we need to support a government that will continue to honour our value to the citizens of Ontario.