



Safety and Support for Students

Last October Ontario's voters overwhelmingly returned the Liberal party to a second majority government led by Dalton McGuinty. The Liberals scored a resounding victory and thereby secured a second mandate to serve the people of this province. In November McGuinty announced his intention to focus on helping the poor in a message that resonated with all those who work in public service. He took quick steps in November to assign this initiative to an anti-poverty committee led by London North Centre MPP Deb Matthews, the newly appointed Minister of Child and Youth Services. Her ministry is also responsible for the Best Start program, Children's Mental Health and Autism, and Youth Opportunities – all of which are important services for our students and their families.

For principals and vice-principals November was the month to receive training on the Safe Schools amendments, which came into effect on Feb. 1, 2008. Presenters contracted by CODE (Council of Ontario Directors of Education) provided the training and some 85 people delivered over 100 workshops in 30 days. The amendments were legislated through Bill 212 in the previous session of the legislature and there were many questions and concerns voiced by CPCO and other organizations. Among those concerns were the changes in suspension, expulsions, appeals and the requirement to consider mitigating circumstances. While few argued with the laudable goal of keeping more students in school, there was a resounding silence on the question of victim's rights. Meanwhile there has been an increase in complaints to the College of Teachers concerning principals for "failure to supervise." Anecdotal information reveals that the safety of students is the catalyst for many of these complaints.

Administrators find themselves in a bind. Supervision minutes reduced by collective agreements have put more principals and vice-principals on scheduled duty at two to three times the number of minutes of staff whom they supervise. Principal investigations have become more onerous and the need to prepare for anticipated appeals has increased the documentation process when disciplining students. To be fair, the Ministry of Education has provided funding to support school boards and some boards have developed elaborate web-based resources to support students. However, at the end of the day the greatest need is for student support at the school level.

In November 2006 CPCO recommended that "the Ministry of Education create a framework for assessing and funding the resources required to support students with intensive behavioural and mental health needs." In January 2008 Ministers Wynne and

Matthews announced \$9 million over three years "to help boards work with community partners to provide at-risk students with access to these additional supports" which are mentioned elsewhere as "mental health providers and child and family services." This new money complements the previous \$43 million allocated for training programs and additional personnel including \$10 million for 170 psychologists, social workers, child and youth workers and attendance counsellors. This is a small but helpful first step towards supporting students.

Unfortunately the additional funding for school administration did not translate into more principals and vice-principals in schools. Despite the funding increases in 2006 and 2007 for in-school administration, CPCO members reported no increases in their ranks as these new funds were used to balance board deficits. This matter remains a current issue for trustees as noted by the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association in its brief to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, "One time measures used to achieve a balanced 2007-08 budget will not be available in the future for many school boards." The provincial trustees have asked for the funding benchmarks to be increased immediately "to align them more closely with actual costs incurred by school boards."

The government is also in a bind. The economy has slowed down and there is speculation that a U.S. recession will have a direct impact on Ontario. Rising oil prices have increased heating and transportation costs for boards. More importantly every school board in the province will be bargaining new contracts with their teacher unions and other employee groups this spring. Minister Wynne has invited the boards and unions to provincial discussion tables with the expressed hope of making decisions that focus on serving the needs of students. While noble and optimistic, the feasibility of her goal will be tested in the coming months when the hard bargaining begins.

The Minister believes four more years of peace and stability would best serve the students of this province and all who work in the education system. This common interest should be the foundation for the provincial discussion tables and it should be the basis for ensuring safety in our schools. As educators who value safe schools for students, employees and visitors, it is within our ability to share this responsibility. We must work collaboratively and respectfully to determine what is required to meet this goal. It is imperative that we strike a new approach before lawsuits and monetary judgments limit our discretion and ability to act in a sound and professional manner. That is what led to the original Safe Schools Act.