

Creating an Education Partnership Table

First in a series of mini-discussion papers prepared for the Education Partnership Table to permit wide input into the direction of education in Ontario.

March 18, 2004 (v.2)

WORKING TOGETHER

The last several years in publicly funded education in Ontario were marked by significant conflict, reflected in widespread disagreement about major policies, a record 25 million learning days lost to students from protest, strikes and lock-outs and constant unpredictability in direction and funding.

Clearly, this was neither desirable, nor sustainable. One of the related indicators is that one in four net new students during the past eight years went to private schools instead, which saw a 40 per cent increase in overall enrolment.

Particularly striking is the development noted by the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE) report *The Schools We Need* (2003) wherein even potentially useful reforms undertaken in Ontario were so poorly implemented as to negate their value.

Meanwhile, other jurisdictions around the world are leaving Ontario behind by finding ways to convey an “education advantage” upon their children and young adults. The McGuinty government believes strongly in the ability of publicly funded education in Ontario to do as well as anywhere, under the right conditions.

It is self evident that we need peace and stability in our system, particularly now. We propose

that we can achieve this through new methods of co-operation. Publicly funded education is not and cannot be the sum of competing interests. There must always be an overarching public interest that all groups and individuals can identify with and find worthwhile to agree on promoting. Further, it needs to be truly the “public” interest, connected to the confidence of the Ontario public at large.

The former government declared the way forward unilaterally. As Minister of Education, I propose instead to set up new ongoing mechanisms to engage the tremendous insight, skill and leadership we have within the education sector and to reach out to the general public.

WHY A “PARTNERSHIP”?

The idea of partnership reflects the mutual commitment that will be required to move publicly funded education in Ontario forward. While new to this province, it has been tried successfully in other jurisdictions. Most importantly however, it has tremendous potential to fit the particular situation facing Ontario JK – 12 education at present. The same negative experience that forced many individuals and groups to confront needs in the system has also permitted many to understand and appreciate possibilities to a greater degree than might otherwise have been possible. The idea of the partnership is to have processes that will tap into those ideas and

aspirations constructively and enable everyone in education to understand the perspectives and viewpoints of others. The challenges facing education are such that we require the very best solutions possible. We can only succeed if the people who either carry out initiatives in education, or are directly affected by them, are able to help shape the initiatives and, therefore, are in a position to support them.

HOW WILL THE PARTNERSHIP WORK?

The partnership proposed is on two levels. First, “education partnership” describes the general relationship we are seeking with all elements within education and our government’s commitment to engage everyone who provides publicly funded education services. For example, we have created the e-network OPEN (Ontario Provincial Education Network) to better communicate with everyone interested in provincial education policy.

Second, leaders of representative groups in education are being invited to meetings (the Education Partnership Table) to discuss substantive problems and issues facing the system and to contribute to their successful resolution. It is not a substitute for other established meetings by the Minister or the government with individual groups or organizations in the sector. It is a forum particularly for groups who represent large segments of the education effort, whether local electors, students, parents, teachers, support workers or principals.

We also intend to involve auxiliary groups, such as non-profit organizations and business, who

make important contributions to publicly funded education success. We also will work with all groups who need assistance to become fully representative.

The Table is not a diplomatic gathering where parties simply state predetermined positions. It can only work if it operates as a problem-solving forum, where participants explain underlying wants and needs behind positions and bring facts to bear that allow others to appreciate their viewpoint.

The only overarching premise for the partnership is that all participants are committed to a stronger publicly funded education system. Participants are asked to make an explicit commitment to the Table, as proposed on the following page, for an initial year and, ideally, for the full mandate of the government.

The significance of the Table will be determined by the willingness of its members. How often it meets, for example, will be a function of progress we are able to make.

For the present, it is proposed that the Table meet in private so that members will feel free to share views candidly, but that members could also feel free to report their views. Information provided will not be secret, but some may be embargoed temporarily. Discussion papers, for example, will be distributed in draft form in advance, but then made public only after all members have had an opportunity for initial input.

Your feedback is welcome and solicited. It should be directed to:

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PROPOSED EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP COMMITMENTS

The Minister of Education commits to:

- At the earliest stage and to the greatest extent possible, bring substantive policies forward for discussion before proceeding;
- Attend and chair meetings, participate in discussion and seek agreement on issues;
- Provide advance background information on potential directions to facilitate meaningful discussion;
- Take all input into account and, wherever possible, provide direct feedback; and
- Participate in activities between Table meetings to develop solutions.

Members of the Education Partnership Table are asked to commit to:

- Participate by providing their own and their members' perspectives on the common public interest in publicly funded education;
- Agree to participate constructively and contribute to consensus building;
- Share the information provided on issues with their members and seek out their members' perspectives;
- Wherever possible, raise issues first at the Table, presenting problems as challenges for all to examine and help solve; and
- Participate in activities between Table meetings to develop solutions.