

ONTARIO 360 – EDUCATION – TRANSITION BRIEFING

Careful, incremental reform to improve Ontario’s public education system

Issue

Public education in Ontario is a story of hard-won success thanks to a large-scale social commitment to quality. The system’s resilience and growth under parties of all political stripes, is one of the great achievements of public policy in Ontario. With relative labour peace, investments in human capital, and an extension to full-day kindergarten for 4-year-olds, the system has continued to serve students, contributing to higher graduation rates and generally higher test scores for students in the last 15 years.

On occasion, political leaders will offer aggressive proposals to change the system – proposing increased support for private schools, withdrawal of public support for Catholic education, or more aggressive and earlier streaming of students into either applied or academic streams. But these measures either do not have sufficient public support, or they would upset the political and social consensus that has made public education in Ontario so successful.

Policymakers of all political stripes should be looking around corners, and working with and listening to educators and parents, to those pressing or coming challenges that call for reform, and not revolution.

Overview

Ontario’s K-12 education system comprises public and private primary and secondary schools. The province’s school boards are divided among the four large separate yet publicly-funded school systems – 31 English public, 29 English Catholic, four French public, and eight French Catholic.¹

¹ Ministry of Education, Education facts 2015-16. Available at: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/educationFacts.html.

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These school boards have roles in allocating provincial funding among their respective districts. Among the school boards' responsibilities include: determining the number, size and location of schools; building, equipping, and furnishing schools; providing specific programming tailored to the needs of the school community; hiring teachers and other staff; and so on.²

The Minister of Education (and the Ministry of Education) administers the *Education Act* and related regulations. The Minister is responsible for developing curriculum, setting requirements for student diplomas and certificates, and so on.³

As of 2015-16, there were 3,978 elementary and 913 secondary schools in Ontario (excluding private schools). Total spending (excluding capital) was estimated to be \$22.6 billion. Total capital spending was another \$1.06 billion. There are 113,703 full-time equivalent teachers in the public system, another 7,313 full-time equivalent administrators (such as principals and vice-principals), and nearly 10,000 full-time equivalent early childhood educators. Total enrolment was 1,993,432.

The upshot is that Ontario's K-12 public education system is big, diverse, and involves various players with separate yet complementary roles. It is critical that the incoming government understands these complexities, how they have evolved, and how each of these roles is essential to the proper functioning and positive outcomes of the province's education system.

The need for reform

There is often think-tank scholarship on the both of the ends of the political spectrum that calls for fundamental reform – including ending public support for Catholic education or discouraging private options or other sweeping proposals.

² Ministry of Education, Who's responsible for your child's education?. Available at: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/brochure/whosresp.html.

³ Ibid.

This advocacy may affirm ideological sensibilities but ignores practical questions of implementation or the risk of disrupting the Ontario's education system careful balance between various priorities, preferences, and objectives.

It is not to say that there is no room for reform – including investing in educational capital, refining and improving curriculum, and enabling more classroom innovation and student-centric teaching. But these efforts will invariably involve evolution rather than revolution. Ontario's next government must start with a clear understanding of what is working and a commitment to build on it.

How to move forward

Critical investments: With many investments in teaching and quality already making their way through the system, attention needs to be turned to other investment needs in public education, especially school buildings, special education, student wellness and Indigenous education. The current government has made commendable multi-year commitments in many of these areas, and it will be important that they be sustained.

These investments are important both to maintain the conditions for quality and to serve groups who need more attention, and to maintain public confidence in the system. By default or design, or thanks to their successes in their core mandate, public schools are expected to play a more active role in the social fabric of society – the buildings serve as physical community hubs, and the services they provide help children and families stay fed, loved and cared-for, as well as educated. So the buildings need to be in a condition that facilitate learning and give confidence to parents, and the services need to be responsive to the community's emerging social needs.

Taking equity seriously: Public education is one of the great equity-generating institutions in Ontario. It enhances life chances for those children who start lower on the socio-economic scale. And it ensures that no one school is radically inferior to another. Given the gravitational pull (through housing markets, international financial flows, and technological change which

amplifies winning and losing groups) towards greater inequality within Western nations, schools need to be equipped with the tools to identify and assist those students who are in need; as well as to create social capital and social bonds across a wide set of families. This means giving schools and school boards more ability to know the backgrounds and circumstances for their students, so that appropriate interventions based on their needs can be designed.

Diversification and innovation in curriculum: Curriculum can be the subject of political controversy, as the recent review of the health and physical education (“sex ed”) curriculum shows. But we should not learn the wrong lessons from the sex-ed reform, and shy away from safety-enhancing changes just because they can be opportunistically attacked or taken out of context. Curriculum reviews should be inclusive and based in the best available evidence and science, both around how the results to date have been achieved, and around the knowledge and skills that curriculum seeks to impart. Curriculum reviews may also need to be more regular and more rapid, as our knowledge about the world in which curriculum is based (and in the technology that can support or inhibit that learning) evolves ever-more rapidly.

More importantly, while it is tempting to tilt the focus of curriculum towards the latest subject area deemed to be important – coding / computer science, math, reading, health, life skills – we should bring more attention to innovation around method. Classroom models will need to continue to evolve to respond to different learning styles, and the understandable and necessary desire from parents and community members for education to face out into the world.

Underlying all of these reform efforts, not just on the politically hot issues, must be a commitment to include educators and parents at every turn. That principle is embedded in many of the processes that the province and school boards run; with a shared political commitment to ever-more inclusive processes, we can ensure that public education in Ontario is ready for the challenges of tomorrow.

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