

Modernizing Ontario's Education System to Drive Accountability and Improvement and Create a Competitive Advantage that Will Prepare Students for the Jobs of Tomorrow

The Albany Club, Toronto

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**Remarks by
The Hon. Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education**

Good afternoon.

I'd like to start by thanking the Albany Club for inviting me to speak to you.

I also want to thank and acknowledge:

- Linda Franklin [**Albany Club President**]
- **[Additional thank you's/shout-outs]**

As Ontario returns to normalcy, there are many reasons to feel a sense of optimism about the future.

Employment in Ontario increased by over 35,000 jobs in March, bringing the total number of new jobs created since we took office to over

500,000.

These job numbers prove that Ontario's economic plan for growth and prosperity is working.

Our government reduced the cost of doing business in Ontario by \$7 billion a year, and we continue to create the right conditions to create more jobs and attract game-changing investments.

We are building up Ontario's auto industry for the future of Electric Vehicles and EV battery production, encouraging the growth of a strong and resilient life sciences sector, and attracting billion-dollar investments by manufacturers who know that our province is Open for Business.

Each of these exciting milestones in our auto,

life sciences and technology sectors mean the creation of new well-paying local jobs.

But if we want to grow these sectors, and if we want to attract billion-dollar investments to our province, Ontario must have a well-educated workforce.

More specifically, our education system must teach Ontario's young people the skills they'll need. That's what I'd like to talk to you about at this luncheon.

It's an honour for me to stand before so many educated and informed conservatives and tell you about our government's modernization of Ontario's education system.

We are driving accountability and improvement, and creating a competitive advantage that will

prepare students for the jobs of tomorrow.

I consider myself to be a “next-gen conservative”, meaning I believe in the potential of the next generation to build a better Canada.

But I also know that young people face real challenges in a fast-changing world. Empowering that generation starts with fixing education.

Many conservatives think of reforming education as a “shield issue,” rather than as a “sword issue,” that’s effective for attacking the left, such as cutting taxes or tackling crime.

They believe the left can always promise to out-spend us on education, and the only people who care about education don’t vote for conservative parties anyway, so the best we

can do is to manage the file effectively and hopefully blunt their attack.

Indeed, with an election later this spring, the teacher unions are already falsely accusing us of making cuts.

Here are the facts: Our government will provide Ontario's school boards with \$26.6 billion in total funding for the 2022-23 school year – **that's the highest investment in public education in Ontario's history.**

And average per-pupil funding through the Grants for Student Needs program is projected to rise to over \$13,000, which is a 2.7 per cent increase over 2021-22, and another record high.

Education is not a “shield” issue. Hard-working

families in every corner of our province passionately care about the education their children are receiving in school.

They want to know that their kids are learning the skills they'll need in the workplace.

And at a time when Ontario is facing the largest skilled labour shortage in a generation, and more than 40 per cent of jobs in Canada are at high risk of getting disrupted by technology and computers, it is critically important that we prepare the students of today for the jobs of tomorrow.

Our government has a positive story to tell. For the past four years, we have been busy:

- Equipping young people with life and job

skills;

- Protecting and safeguarding students;
- Revoking regressive Liberal hiring practices to reward merit, not years of seniority;
- Building Ontario; and
- Putting money back into the pockets of Ontario families.

Let me take a few minutes to tell you about the progress we have made in just four years.

1 Equipping Students with Life and Job Skills

As technology advances, the global economy is increasingly becoming a digital economy. We have to adjust to that reality or run the risk of getting left behind.

When I ran for office four years ago, parents and employers alike told me the education system was not doing an adequate job of preparing young people for the future, and they wanted to see more emphasis on STEM, or Science, Technology, Engineering and Math learning.

In the fall of 2018, our government conducted a province-wide consultation on the state of our education system.

Only 21 per cent of survey respondents believed that Ontario's schools were doing enough to promote STEM education in elementary school.

And 65 per cent of participants in a special telephone townhall meeting felt students should be learning more about STEM topics at an earlier age.

For over a decade, too many students were lacking everyday math, financial literacy and numeracy skills.

This was confirmed by some very disappointing 2018-19 math test results provided by the Education Quality and Accountability Office, or EQAO.

It was especially alarming to see that 52 per cent of Grade Six students were not meeting the provincial standard in math.

Over the previous ten years, Grade Six math scores either stagnated or fell, thanks in part to a decision made by the previous Liberal government to use classrooms as a testing ground for unproven pedagogy, such as “Discovery Math”.

When our government took office four years ago, we knew we had to update the curriculum to better meet the needs of the labour market. More specifically, that meant:

- Making financial literacy and digital fluency key priorities;
- Investing \$200 million to support a four year math strategy;
- Teaching valuable transferrable skills such as leadership, communication, collaboration and critical thinking;
- Promoting the skilled trades as a top-choice career path for young people and increasing awareness of, and access to apprenticeship

programs; and

- Improving Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, or STEM learning.

That last point about improving STEM learning in schools deserves a bit more discussion.

I'm proud to say that two years ago, our government launched an updated elementary math curriculum that teaches coding, or computer programming skills starting in Grade One.

Mandatory learning on coding from Grades One to Nine, consistent with the math curriculum, will further enshrine Ontario as a STEM leader.

In fact, in Grade Three, students can even learn how to program a small robot.

This was the first time Ontario's elementary math curriculum had been updated since 2005 – the year that YouTube was launched.

Last year, we introduced a de-streamed Grade Nine mathematics course that builds on that learning and really drills down on financial literacy, including interest rates and budgeting, as well as data literacy and mathematical modelling.

And earlier this month, we introduced a new science and technology curriculum, including a de-streamed Grade Nine science course for the 2022-23 school year.

Students will explore emerging technology,

such as artificial intelligence systems, and build an understanding of food literacy through mandatory learning on healthy eating, food systems, connections to mental health, the role the environment plays in how our food grows, and the importance of locally-sourced food.

Students will also use the engineering design process to invent and design innovative solutions.

For example, in Grade Six, students design and test devices such as flying machines, and in Grade Eight, students can design a system that replicates a conveyer belt.

And from Grades Four to Nine, students will learn about how advancements in science and emerging technologies will enhance the skilled trades and provide exciting career

opportunities.

By updating the curriculum to focus on the critically-important skills I mentioned earlier, we are ensuring Ontario's education system is one that works for our people, our economy and our families.

2 Protecting and Safeguarding Students

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a reminder that the top priority of any Minister of Education should be the health and safety of Ontario's students, school staff and their families.

Our government understands that in-person learning is essential for the mental health and well-being of students. That is why we worked closely with the Chief Medical Officer of

Health and other public health experts to develop a \$1.6 billion plan to keep kids and families safe.

Stopping the spread of COVID-19 in schools did not prevent us from protecting students from other potential threats.

Early in our mandate, we introduced a revised, nation-leading Health and Physical Education curriculum that included new mandatory learning on sexual consent, concussions, mental health awareness, healthy body image, human trafficking, cybersecurity and bullying.

Our government was the first in Canada to mandate anti-sex trafficking protocols, as well as the development of an anti-bullying plan for every school.

These measures build on Ontario becoming the first province to mandate sexual abuse prevention training for all educators in schools and child care, as well as implementing a lifetime ban for any educator found guilty of a serious Criminal Code offence like sexual abuse or violence.

In fact, our government went further by now publicly posting the names of educators involved in serious criminal proceedings, with the aim of enhancing transparency for parents and protecting kids.

3 Revoking Regressive Liberal Hiring Practices

Protecting students from potential harms is critically important, but let me be clear: the

vast majority of Ontario teachers are dedicated and law-abiding individuals who care deeply about their students.

There are a lot of great teachers out there, and our government wants to see them succeed.

That's why we revoked Regulation 274 back in October 2020.

Regulation 274 was a regressive hiring regulation that was brought in by the Liberals to appease the teacher unions.

By revoking this regulation, our government stood up for students and parents.

Now, instead of simply rewarding years of

seniority, teacher hiring by school boards will be dictated by merit, where qualifications and experience guide hiring.

This approach was needed more than ever during the pandemic, as it greatly helped school boards in hiring teachers to meet their local needs.

4 Building Ontario

Regulation 274 was not the only Liberal mess our government has cleaned up in the Education file.

You may remember that the previous Liberal government disadvantaged countless numbers of students and parents alike by closing over 600 schools across the province.

After a decade of school closures under the Liberals, Ontario is once again building schools to prepare young people for the jobs of tomorrow.

We are investing \$14 billion over ten years to support school construction, improve existing educational facilities and create child care spaces for working families.

Since 2018, we have funded construction for 76 new schools, and during this period 54 new schools were completed.

And at the end of 2021, I announced funding for the new Lower Yonge Precinct Elementary School here in Toronto. Once the project is completed, it will be Ontario's first school within a mixed-use condominium building.

Our government is building and improving schools because hard-working parents deserve access to safe and affordable child care, and as I mentioned earlier, in-person learning is essential for student success.

But there's no question that remote, or online learning demonstrated its usefulness during the pandemic. I will add that Ontario's education system enjoys a wealth of online educational resources, and our government believes all students should be able to access them.

That's why our government provided school boards with electronic devices, and the resources to connect Ontario's nearly 5,000 publicly-funded schools to high-speed internet.

I'm pleased to say that nearly 100 per cent of schools are now connected, with three active projects underway in remote schools.

5 Putting Money Back into the Pockets of Ontario Families

Once again, the Government of Ontario is investing in our schools, and in the success of our young people.

Just as importantly, we are providing real support to hard-working families in every corner of the province.

Under the leadership of Premier Ford, our government was elected to make life more affordable for Ontarians, and to put more money back into the pockets of moms and dads.

During the pandemic, our government provided over \$1.6 billion in direct payments to parents through three dedicated support programs to help families cover the costs of child care and at-home learning created by COVID-19.

We ensured that our health care and other frontline workers had access to free emergency child care so they could continue performing critical roles in their communities during times of unprecedented hardship.

We are tackling any potential learning gaps created by the pandemic by providing \$176 million for tutoring supports in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years – the single largest investment in tutoring in Ontario history. All at no cost to parents.

And through an agreement with Shoppers Drug Mart, our government secured a donation of six million menstrual products that will be provided to schools over the next three years to ensure that low-income students have access to these necessities as they learn.

I believe that all of these actions are making a big difference for hard-working Ontario families.

As I recently said to a group of public policy students at the University of Toronto, the Minister of Education should always listen to the experts, and engage with the Ministry's many stakeholders...

But he or she should never forget that the Minister of Education must put the needs of families and children first. As Minister, that is

my guiding principle, or my North Star.

I'm proud to belong to a government that is modernizing Ontario's education system, driving accountability and improvement, and creating a competitive advantage that will prepare students for the jobs of tomorrow.

I'm happy to take any questions you might have.

Thank you.