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One School System Gail McCabe, PhD RSSW*

As the parent of three children, a sociologist and an educator, I am keenly aware of the challenges to education in Ontario. I have also done extensive reading and review of studies in education specific to Ontario. As a result, I have come to see education not as a finite process that focuses on students from 5-25, but as a lifelong project in which our people are encouraged and supported to develop the knowledge, skills and experience that will enable them to make positive contributions to society. Given this redefinition of education, parents, educators and policy makers must rethink the way education would be best organized for these purposes and they must consider both public and personal interests.

While the education needs of Ontarians are as diverse as our population, the publicly-funded education system is but one institution. Other institutions that must take a role in education include the family as well as religious, ethnic, cultural, and philosophical associations that already serve the needs of their respective communities. These institutions are well suited to provide education regarding the unique values, practices and beliefs arising from their particular traditions. The education thus conveyed is culturally and ethnically distinct and highly relevant to members of the group. Therefore, it cannot be undertaken by the publicly-funded education system, which must provide a broad-based general education of relevance to all Ontarians regardless of their distinct affiliations.

More specifically, the public education system has a mandate to generate a broad understanding and appreciation of human diversity and cross cultural distinctions informed by ongoing dialogue with the multicultural communities of Ontario. Research has demonstrated that such an education promotes respect for diverse groups, and sensitivity to the needs and traditions of others. Further, it influences individual attitudes reducing the negative effects of stereotyping and prejudice, while promoting positive interaction between individuals across cultural groups. Beyond those significant objectives, the publicly-funded education system must also provide a more inclusive educational initiative such that no individual is excluded on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, gender, ability, age or geographical location.

On all these accounts, I support the following education priorities to be fully integrated into the publicly-funded education system:

1. early childhood education programs for children from 2-5 years of age creatively structured through a network of Early Years Centres;
2. a unified elementary and secondary education system with a renewed commitment to a broad-based curriculum including studies in the humanities and social sciences as well as the sciences and technology;
3. literacy and life-long learning programs for adults, English as a Second Language courses for all persons in need including newcomers, and accessible education for Ontarians with disabilities;
4. publicly funded post-secondary education in community colleges and universities accessible to all students regardless of ability to pay;
5. graduate education that supports students to develop their intellectual capacities and scholarly interests to the fullest extent;
6. support for public universities so that they maintain the highest standards in research and education
7. accessibility to quality education in rural as well as urban areas and in aboriginal communities.

Taken together, these initiatives will make for a qualitatively superior educational experience with the potential to develop critical and creative thinkers well-prepared to address the complex problems that have and will continue to arise in the future. I see it as an obligation of government to ensure that this broad-based education initiative is fully supported through effective policies and adequate financial resources. Further, the peoples of Ontario must make a commitment to ensure that our multicultural social policies inform both curriculum and the delivery of education in our publicly-funded school

system. This goal can be accomplished through the provision of education in the Humanities and Social Sciences regarding the multicultural aspects of our populace and through sensitivity education for all participants in the system, educators, policy makers, students and parents, so that no one particular perspective or cultural view dominates. These initiatives will require courage, creativity and collaboration on the part of our elected representatives as well as community leaders and parents. We cannot expect our children to get along if we do not do likewise.

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