

Setting a new course for education and training in Ontario

Since the election of the Mike Harris government in 1995, Ontario's economy has been on the upswing. The province has enjoyed some of the strongest growth in the industrialized world. A record breaking 200,000 net new jobs were created in Ontario last year alone. Queen's Park was putting its fiscal house in order with an agenda of sounder fiscal management, tax cuts, and deficit reduction.

Most Ontarians who participated in the Jobs and Investment Board consultations in 1998 agreed that current economic conditions are relatively good. But there was also a strong sense throughout the province that unless people aspired to achieve greater success, our competitive advantages, productivity, and quality of life will slip further behind the global economic leaders. Mobile capital—and mobile human and technical talent—will increasingly migrate to more rewarding opportunities south of the border and elsewhere.

Three of the most powerful forces shaping Ontario's economic future are the ascendancy of knowledge-intensive industries, rapid and continuous technological change, and global integration. The ability of Ontario's employers, workers, students, and educational institutions to adapt to these change forces—and more importantly, to seize the emerging economic opportunities—will determine more than anything else will our success in the 21st century.

To meet the challenge, Ontarians collectively will need to develop a culture of lifelong learning. This means increasing the knowledge, skill, and participation levels of Ontarians across all age groups and life stages through a quality, market-responsive education and training system. Every segment of the economy, from individuals to businesses, organizations, and governments, will need to

BY DAVID LINDSAY

David Lindsay is president and CEO of the Ontario Jobs and Investment Board.

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take ownership for the different components of the challenge.

Individuals need to be more responsible for managing their own long-term career and learning plans. Educational institutions and providers need to meet the expectations of their core clients—students and employers—by fostering greater entrepreneurship and innovation, and by being more responsive to the demands of the economy. Unions and professional associations need to take on more meaningful roles in implementing workplace training and apprenticeship programs. Businesses need to increase their investment in employee training, and to partner with colleges and universities on solutions to eliminate critical skill shortages.

Governments will need to make more strategic and results-oriented decisions about investing the taxpayer funds available for education and training. Governments will also continue to be responsible for setting and enforcing high standards in learning, brokering partnerships between business and educational insti-

tutions, and guaranteeing accessible education to all Ontarians.

In the first term of the Harris mandate, the government focused on the contentious—but essential—task of restoring the fundamentals to the education system. Education property tax rates skyrocketed 42 percent between 1985 and 1990, and went up another 20 percent between 1990 and 1995. Fiscal accountability and the value-for-dollar equation in the education system were in jeopardy. Ontario was spending more per capita on public education than most other jurisdictions in the world, but the province's students were being outperformed in interprovincial and international tests.

The overhaul of schools has produced a more demanding curriculum with emphasis on mathematics and science, standardized school report cards, and province-wide, performance-based student testing. The number of school boards and school politicians was cut, allowing administrative cost savings to be reinvested into classroom learning. The government stabilized education property taxes in its first term, and pledged to cut the residential tax rate by 20 percent over the next five years.

Restoring the fundamentals, however, is not the finish line. Ontario's education and training system will need continued restructuring to address looming demographic and structural pressures and to build competitive advantages for Ontario in the new economy. The Jobs and Investment Board consultations highlighted the most pressing concerns:

- Growth in Canada's technology-driven sectors is imperiled by critical skill shortages.
- Ontario's graying population will leave a smaller workforce to support

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a larger number of old people. Today there are approximately 5.5 people of working age for each person 65 or older. That number will drop to 3.7 people by 2021. Slower labour force growth will place a bigger onus on existing workers to retrain or upgrade to meet the skill demands of the new economy.

- Over one-third of Ontario workers do not belong to a traditional employer-employee relationship. Part-time employment is expanding three times faster than full-time employment, and one of every six workers is self-employed. A growing segment of the workforce is beyond the reach of conventional training programs.
- As a group, youth and young adults continue to be hardest hit by the unemployment problem. One in four Ontarians between the ages of 15 and 24 has never worked.
- As the baby boom "echo" moves into the 18-to-24 age group, college and university enrollment will grow by 18 percent between now and 2010. Post-secondary institutions face the additional burden of accommodating the "double cohort" of student admissions in 2003, resulting from the elimination of grade 13.
- Unequal access to information technology in some parts of the province raises the spectre of technological "haves" and "have nots."

To equip people with the skill requirements of the knowledge and technology-based economy, and to achieve excellence at all levels, Ontario's education and training system will need to implement at least seven strategic directions in the next five years:

1. **A market-responsive system.** An independent quality assessment organization for colleges and universities is needed to establish quality standards, assess performance, and report publicly on the results. Government funding of post-secondary institutions could be tied to the employment results of their

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graduates and other performance indicators. Comparative performance data could also assist prospective students in making informed choices about schooling options.

2. **Seamless education.** Colleges and universities will need to develop more collaborative programming and transferable credits to satisfy the growing demand for combined theoretical and applied education. With net international migration driving two-thirds of Ontario's population growth, a provincial accreditation system to validate education and training credentials from qualified organizations around the world is also overdue.

3. **Distance learning.** Internet-based learning will be a more powerful catalyst to expand access to education and training, by connecting homes and workplaces with a wider range of learning opportunities and labour market information than ever before. Development of a distance learning network and a province-wide digital library will encourage new partnerships between education and training institutions, communication service providers and software developers. Distance learning is also a key element in the strategy to expand classroom capacity, while minimizing the cost of new bricks and mortar capital.

4. **Entrepreneurship and innovation.** A curriculum that promotes entrepreneurship, creativity, and risk-taking—the hallmarks of an innovation culture—is needed in Ontario, beginning in the early years and continuing with business and management courses at the secondary level. Entrepreneurship is best taught through a combination of

classroom training and exposure to real-world business success stories in the local community.

5. **Global dimension.** All elements of Ontario need to embrace the challenge of participating and winning in a global economy. Supporting initiatives include strengthening the international business content in secondary and post-secondary curricula, expanding foreign language training at the elementary and secondary levels, and opening more opportunities for international student exchanges and internships in international business settings.

6. **Private sector leadership.** Ontario employers consistently underinvest in employee training and apprenticeships, compared with their international counterparts. Businesses need to strengthen the corporate commitment to lifelong learning and skills upgrading, establish a stronger presence in post-secondary curriculum development and funding, and provide increased co-op, internship, and mentoring opportunities for students.

7. **Strategic expansion.** Government and partnership investments in colleges and universities need to be more targeted on correcting strategic "mismatches" between workforce supply and demand in fast growing, high-value-added sectors of the economy. A good example is the current "double the pipeline" initiative, aimed at increasing post-secondary enrollment in computer science and high-demand engineering fields.

The province's SuperBuild Growth Fund, which will invest \$742 million this year for post-secondary institutions to expand and modernize in anticipation of the growing demand for learning is

setting the tone for future capital investments. To be considered for SuperBuild funding, colleges and universities will need to demonstrate the amount of partnership funding in place, projected student demand for the new facility and programs, and the project's impact on local/regional economic competitiveness.

In the final analysis, the success of an education and training agenda will not be measured by the size of government allocations to colleges, universities, and schools. Business investment levels in workforce training and in post-secondary partnerships are not the most critical measures either. Although a key thrust in education and training reforms is directed at implementing new and creative approaches to financing, success will be based on results—and assessing the results against widely accepted goals and benchmarks.

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Performance measures should have practical connections to the long-term strategic goals of Ontario's education and training system, emphasize results or outcomes instead of efforts or activities, be easily understood, and be flexible enough to allow for improvements.

As a practical next step, the process of establishing performance measures should encourage Ontarians to converge, collaborate, and stay focused on the goal of strengthening the education and training system's contribution to long-term economic prosperity. ♦

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The government also reduced the length of the election campaign to 28 days from what had usually been about 40 days. The TV advertising period of three weeks now made up a greater proportion of the total campaign. Being able to spend much more than the other parties on TV advertising gave the Tories an advantage in the shorter campaign. There was less time to discuss the government's record and a greater percentage of the campaign left voters open to the manipulation of advertising. The shortened campaign also helped the Tories fashion their fund-raising lead. A party with a large number of willing and wealthy donors requires only a few well-connected individuals to collect large sums of money rapidly. But a party that relies on many small contributions from individuals will need a longer period to collect large sums through techniques such as mail fund raising. The complete information on contributions is not yet available, but the fact that the Tories could raise 90.5 percent of their contributions in the form of donations

Being able to spend unlimited funds on polling gives a campaign the opportunity to manipulate and tailor messages to their strengths and their opponents' weaknesses. Flush with contributions, the Harris Conservatives took full advantage of their changes to the spending rules.

over \$100 while the Liberals and NDP raised 83 and 71 percent, respectively, in the same form suggests that the Tories were again able to take advantage of the rule changes they initiated.

What to make of all of these changes and their effects? The Harris Tories would not have initiated them if they did not see a benefit. The changes helped them to outspend their competitors by a wide margin and forced the Liberals to end the campaign almost \$2.9 million in

debt and left the NDP owing \$1.9 million. For Ontario political parties, those are major debts that will require both the NDP and Liberals to intensify their efforts to raise money from corporations and that, in turn, will require policy concessions favourable to businesses and the wealthy. As we move toward more expensive elections, the policies of all parties will need to become more attuned to the wealthy who can foot the election bill. ♦