



# Great to Excellent:

Launching the Next Stage of Ontario's Education Agenda

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## Introduction.

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In 2003 Ontario's schools were in a troubled state. The achievement of students was 'good' but flat lined — stagnant results year after year. Morale of teachers was low; the schools as a whole could be characterized as 'loosely-coupled' and without focus. The system was downtrodden.

Now in early 2013, the overall performance of the almost 5,000 schools in the province has dramatically improved on most key measures, and continues to improve. According to international measures and independent expert assessment, Ontario is recognized as and is proven to be the best school system in the English-speaking world — and right up at the top with Finland, Singapore and South Korea.

As Premier Dalton McGuinty leaves office, in this paper we will review key aspects of the journey, and set the tasks for the next phase. Nine years of steady improvement is impressive. This is a long time for a system to sustain success. Going from good to great has not been easy. But past experience with large-scale reform suggests it would be all too possible to falter at this stage. The biggest obstacle to further success is the self-satisfaction with what we have accomplished. There is much more to do in going forward. What is needed is a focused launch to the next level of performance. Only a sustained commitment to doing better will keep our global leadership in place.

Ontario unequivocally has developed "from good to great." But we are now at a crucial stage as we head for 2013 and beyond. Will we stand still — or worse, fall behind — while the rest of the world passes us by? Or will we take the necessary steps to build on our success and move from great to excellent?

Let us also note that while there are serious financial constraints, this journey to excellence can be accomplished within the resources that will be available. We must at the same time realize that much more needs to be done to improve on what we have accomplished.

We have been successful because of the deep professionalism of educators across the entire system. No system in the world has progressed without strong rapport between the government and its teachers and principals. Without a partnership of working together, we will almost certainly recede in a world where other systems are pushing toward excellence.

Greatness is the enemy of excellence because it is easy to be complacent, and take things for granted. So, what have we accomplished? And equally important, how do we sustain improvement as well as go beyond it into new levels of learning through focused innovations?

Let's see what is at stake and what can be done.

## **What Has Been Accomplished? (2003-2012)**

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Behind the obvious achievements of increased literacy, numeracy, and high school graduation rates, not to mention the benefits of early learning, lies the real strength of the accomplishment of the last nine years — the deep, widely shared ownership on the part of teachers, schools and school board leaders of the reform agenda.

We will consider the actual accomplishments shortly, but it is significant that at least three prominent international bodies have studied Ontario up close and all found that it is a powerful example of a government deliberately setting out to improve the whole system, and having the results to show for it. These include the OECD in Paris, which conducts the internationally respected PISA assessments of 15-year-olds in literacy, numeracy, and science in 70 countries across the world; the McKinsey group, which carried out two world-wide studies on education system performance; and the National Center for Education and the Economy (NCEE) in the U.S. (see references).

The OECD commissioned a team from Harvard to study what we have done, calling its report *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education*. NCEE went further when it named its report *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants*, urging the U.S. to emulate what we have done. Scores of delegations come to Ontario each year and all end up admiring what we they see.

As to the results themselves, literacy and numeracy — with very high standards at play — have improved from 54 per cent to 70 per cent on average across the province's 4,000 elementary schools as measured by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). EQAO measures and teacher diagnostic assessments in the classroom have become more congruent. Put another way, teachers who conduct good personalized assessments in their classrooms and take corresponding actions predictably see their assessment scores increase. When whole schools do this, the results are phenomenal.

Secondary school reform commenced almost two years after the initiatives in the elementary schools. The innovations in high schools with the Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy, the focus on literacy in grades 9 and 10, and the new Specialist High Skills Major programs that have flourished have been an amazing success. Graduation rates have improved by about two per cent every year, bringing the province's 900 high schools to an 82 per cent graduation rate from its starting point of 68 per cent.

We can express these accomplishments in different terms. There are 125,000 elementary students who have higher proficiency in reading and writing than would have been the case without the strategy; a further 93,000 students graduated from high school because of the strategy; and the gap between special education students and other students has been reduced by over eight per cent, another finding from an external research group. Immigrants who don't speak English when they arrive have also risen rapidly to reduce the gap compared to others. The percentage of students performing at level 1 or below has declined from 17 per cent to less than six per cent at the present time. The number of low-performing elementary schools eligible for the turnaround program — the Ontario Focused Partnership Program — has been reduced from its starting high of 800 schools to its current low of 87 schools, even though the bar has been set even higher. And so it goes, no matter how you cut it — steady progress on most measures.

What really sticks with the external researchers and the numerous site visitors to our schools from all over the world is what they see and hear when they visit schools. They can go into almost any school in the province and they will find consistency of good practice. When they ask teachers or principals to explain what they are doing and why, they get specific and widely shared answers. Educators can point to particular actions and show the link to student learning. They know where each and every student is on the learning journey.

The degree to which the new and better practices have spread across the province is incredible to people who come from systems that struggle to maintain a focus. External observers see the consistency in the views among the stakeholders, from unions and teachers to principals and parents — they all tell the same story. Even the Finns are impressed.

Another domain of substantial progress is full-day kindergarten (FDK). We take this up later in the section on focused innovation because the impact of FDK has not

yet been realized. But the progress to date is substantial. In quantitative terms as of 2012, we have 50 per cent of all students covered (125,000). In 2013, it will be 75 per cent. By September 2014, all 250,000 4- and 5-year-olds will be in full-day kindergarten, the first program of its kind in North America

There is widespread satisfaction among parents, teachers, school and school board leadership, and trustees. Students are learning through inquiry/play-based methods. Instructional strategies (our capacity building) are being modified in grades 1 and 2 to match the new capabilities and confidences of the children being served. Our research from years one and two is now coming in and is showing a strong return on investment as students are better prepared when they get to Grade 1.

Before we made the investment in full day kindergarten, 28 per cent of our students were entering Grade 1 vulnerable because they were seriously behind their peers. As this percentage falls as a result of our investment, for every one per cent drop in vulnerability there will be a one per cent addition to Ontario's contribution to the GDP over the life cycle of each cohort.

We are helping to lead the country and OECD in the development of instruments suitable for assessing development as well as learning. This is indeed innovative territory for the world of early learning.

What all of the above means is that teachers, individually and collectively — and the system as a whole — know what they are doing. They are doing it because it works. They are intrinsically motivated to keep on improving. They are driven not just because they care, but also because they are actually making a measurable difference that affects the lives of their students.

The public has also noticed. The highly regarded Ontario Institute for Studies in Education survey *Public Attitudes Toward Education* is now in its 18<sup>th</sup> edition. At the end of the previous administration in 2002, the percentage of people who were satisfied or very satisfied with the public education system was at 43 per cent. As the Ontario reform unfolded from 2004 to the present, satisfaction climbed rapidly to its present all-time high of 65 per cent.

In the first years of the reform, it required relentless focus and leadership on the part of the Premier and the guiding coalition that worked with him. Those of us who have studied whole system reform know how easy it is for governments to get distracted from the core learning agenda. Ontario maintained its deep focus as it



developed capacity at all levels of the system. Now we see the payoff. While it started out as the government's agenda, it is now the system's agenda — a deep and shared ownership that binds educators and holds them accountable.

Compared to most jurisdictions in the world, and compared to the starting point in 2003, Ontario's strength is its focus and its consistency of practice arising from the new individual and collective capacity that has been established in every corner of the province. It is this triumvirate of focus, consistency of practice, and collective capacity that is our strength. The next phase of the reform is crucial. There are developments in the profession of teaching that might be called the "new pedagogy" that involve fundamental shifts in the roles of teachers and students in becoming "learning partners." These more powerful learning modes could be greatly accelerated by the new technologies that are rapidly coming on the scene. What is at stake here is the higher-order skills and qualities that will form the basis of being successful in the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To compete in this domain will require all the capacity and ingenuity we can muster. This is the heady stuff of innovating for a future that is already upon us.

To go down the path towards excellence requires a high-capacity teaching profession and school leaders to work collectively in focused ways on the consolidation of current success, and on the further development of the innovative learning methods essential for a complex but exciting global world.

Capacity of the teaching profession was the very point that the McKinsey group made in comparing the 20 "most improving systems in the world," which included Ontario. They found that when you go from adequate to good to great, a system must invest in direct capacity-building of teachers. But once the system reaches a certain level — let's call it "greatness" — it requires strategies that mobilize the capacities of peers. They put it directly: as capacity gets higher (which is certainly the case in Ontario), peers become the main source of innovation if you are to go from greatness to excellence.

This is Ontario as it heads into 2013. Will it ramp up the deliberate effort to go to the next stage or will it stall? It is a conscious choice. You don't stumble into excellence.

## Going forward

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The next two sections in combination lay out the core aspects of the next phase that entails both sustaining improvement on current priorities and focused innovation for our next level of achievement.

### 1. Sustaining Improvement

In 2008, building on the success of the first phase, we set out the priorities and plans for moving from good to great. In the paper *Energizing Ontario Education*, we established three core priorities:

- **High levels of student achievement** — in literacy and numeracy at 75 per cent and in high school graduation at 85 per cent.
- **Reduced gaps in school achievement** for all subgroups of students.
- **Increased public confidence in publicly funded education** — greater two-way partnership and confidence with parents, communities and the public at large.

We have already seen that significant progress has been made — enough to qualify for the designation of “great” by those who evaluate us. We have achieved 70 per cent, not 75 per cent, in literacy and numeracy, and 82 per cent, not 85 per cent, in graduation rates. Gaps in most categories are being reduced — special education, English language learners, and students and schools of poverty. The goals of 75 per cent and 85 per cent are not high enough either. Satisfaction on the part of the public at 65 per cent is at an all-time high, but still not good enough. There are some serious gaps — aboriginal students do not fare well; some ethnic subgroups have not progressed; and math has leveled off (the math strategy started later than the literacy strategy, and has only recently been established at many schools—look for results to increase in 2013).

We must work with all our partners to develop new, more ambitious goals. This is no time to let up.

Therefore the first of two commitments for the next phase is to sustain the priorities and the commitment to continuing improvement with respect to the three core goals.

What is especially important about this work is that it feeds into the second priority domain that we are about to discuss. To be specific, we have been progressing upward relative to the standards measured by the province's Education Quality and Assessment Office. The high minimum proficiency we have set is level 3 on a four-point scale, and large numbers of students have advanced from levels 1 and 2 to level 3. Level 3 is a high standard because to meet it, students have to achieve at least a B (70 per cent).

At level 3, students are entering the arena of higher-order skills. It includes literacy and numeracy across the curriculum — in science, social studies, drama and the arts — and it includes demonstrating skills such as critical thinking and problem solving. It feeds forward naturally into the focused innovation era we take up in the next section. Our current level of performance gives us very important advantages for moving to the next stage that can be expressed both generically and specifically. Stated generally, we have built the capacities essential for moving effectively into the immediate future. It takes capacity to build capacity, and we have the baseline power to take off into widespread excellence. In more specific terms, the sector, combined with continued leadership and stimulus from the centre, must innovate beyond its current performance in order to go from great to excellent.

The key question is whether existing capacities that are evident across the province can be leveraged for whole system innovation essential for 2013 and beyond. It will take strong effort and commitment at all levels of the system to achieve excellence in the next four years. This move to excellence will require deeper and widespread innovation in focused areas. Hence the second key priority.

## **2. Engage in focused innovation relative to higher order skills and qualities, test what works and spread effective practices.**

People have been talking about skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century for at least a quarter of a century — a conversation marked by superficiality and vague notions of what it means. This is rapidly changing as new pedagogical specificity and powerful technology converge. Ontario now has the capacity to make pedagogy the foundation in learning through the use of technology and new digital resources. What makes this even more exciting is that the new work is already happening in many pockets across the province.



Figure 1 captures the key qualities — the future is already here. Six Cs form the agenda: character, citizenship, communication, critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and teamwork, and creativity and imagination.

As we delve into the meaning of these concepts, it is important to stress that we should not launch into an abstract discussion. In the next period of development, these core priorities must be defined, operationalized in practice, measured to mark success and to clarify progress and next steps, and widely shared in terms of spreading what works. This process of specificity and dissemination is our strength. We must put it to good use for the next phase of success.

Figure 1.



The capacity of educators in Ontario, as noted, is at such a high level as a result of the strategies of the past nine years that much of the leadership — what we might call leading from the middle — is already in the system. It needs to be cultivated and spread throughout the province, including establishing clarity of each of the six clusters and their interrelationships, learning experiences that develop the skills and dispositions in question, and the means of measuring and fostering progression in their development. But the middle cannot lead in a vacuum. Focused leadership from the government will continue to be essential

for whole system excellence. Brief preliminary descriptions of the six Cs are provided here:

- **Character education**— honesty, self-regulation and responsibility, perseverance, empathy for contributing to the safety and benefit of others, self-confidence, personal health and well-being, career and life skills.
- **Citizenship** — global knowledge, sensitivity to and respect for other cultures, active involvement in addressing issues of human and environmental sustainability.
- **Communication** — communicate effectively orally, in writing and with a variety of digital tools; listening skills.
- **Critical thinking and problem solving** — think critically to design and manage projects, solve problems, make effective decisions using a variety of digital tools and resources.
- **Collaboration** — work in teams, learn from and contribute to the learning of others, social networking skills, empathy in working with diverse others.
- **Creativity and imagination** — economic and social entrepreneurialism, considering and pursuing novel ideas, and leadership for action.

The overall purpose of these six Cs and their underlying DNA is the well-being of the whole student, and the well-being of society, which essentially consists of higher levels of student achievement and the capacity to apply what one knows. The fundamental purpose of education in an excellent system is to produce in all of its graduates — as close to 100 per cent as possible — the quality of leadership. By that we mean the capacity and commitment to act for one’s own good and for the common good.

We could call this the “new entrepreneurial spirit” — a spirit characterized by innovation, risk-taking, commitment, and skilled problem solving in the service of a better future. But unlike previous definitions of entrepreneurialism, this one applies both to business and social domains. Innovation in new technologies is one aspect, but so are social innovations that build new communities and create opportunities for a better life.

Certainly these developments require educational entrepreneurialism and innovation, and importantly more technological savvy. It is worth emphasizing

that education systems around the world have been better at acquiring technology than they have at using it to change the system. Ontario over the past decade has resisted this temptation to invest heavily in technological tools. Instead we have built the pedagogical capacity of teachers to teach well and to learn from each other. Now with focused innovation we must invest in new practices that integrate pedagogy and technology, with the former as the driver. Thus, in the next phase of reform Ontario must employ its considerable expertise in pedagogy to harness the power of the rapidly developing new technologies to achieve results significantly higher than ever before relative to the six Cs.

The six Cs are also attributes that parents and the public value, and that employers seek. They position our graduates for successful careers in Canada and across the globe.

In sum, entrepreneurialism and innovation reach across all six Cs, essentially developing the ability and desire to act on one's values and ideas in the context of working with others. For the first time in history we should strive to ensure that the educated person becomes a doer. Every educated person becomes a leader in his or her own right. It involves what Paul Tough called "grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character."

Our work in Ontario over the past nine years has been marked by specificity, precision and clarity. The same applies here. The six Cs are not vague aspirations. They must and can be grounded in identifiable and measurable realities. We are incredibly advantaged by the fact that several school boards have already started down this road. We will find many examples of concrete exit outcomes related to the six Cs already being formulated and acted upon in school boards. In other words, there currently exists in the province a huge appetite for focused innovation related to the cultivation of the entrepreneurial spirit.

We also need focused innovations in full-day kindergarten. There has been rapid expansion and positive results and strategies emerging from the early evaluations. We must in the next phase become systematically engaged in innovations in early learning. This work currently underway consists of early and continuing diagnosis of learning needs, creating and fostering play-based inquiry and learning experiences that enable progression, assessing progress, and spreading effective practices.

In implementing FDK we will need to employ similar strategies that have been successful with respect to our earlier priorities, including: building on work already in the sector; organizing lateral learning and the spread of good ideas; providing professional development and support resources; keeping people energized through the recognition of good work and progress; developing provincial measures of progress and reporting publicly on them; ensuring each school board has a strategy in place; creating forums for stakeholders, including those in other sectors to work together, and so on.

Our FDK program promotes the development of self-regulation, social-emotional learning, inquiry skills, and play-based learning that fosters creativity, imagination and problem solving. In short, we need to position early learning so that it functions as the beginning of the systematic cultivation of the six Cs for all children in Ontario.

All of these continuing and new developments entail establishing and strengthening connections with parents, communities, employers, social agencies and others as partners. The extension of this work will be attractive to educators, parents and the public because it builds on lots of positive energy that itself will further bolster commitment to progress.

## **Great to Excellence: Launching the Next Phase of Reform.**

We will need a strong endorsement of the agenda by all the partners we have identified and a relentless commitment to the two domains of action identified in the previous sections. Namely: sustained commitment to continuous improvement and an equally concerted pursuit of focused and disciplined innovation.

Just as in 2003, we will need strong central leadership and focused discipline for launching Ontario to the next phase of what we call excellence. It will be a different kind of leadership because it will be leading from strength, but if anything it will require deeper partnership between government and education and other sectors in order to realize the aspirations and qualities embedded in the six Cs.

This paper has not provided details on how to get to the next level of excellence. There is already a great deal of knowledge and expertise in the system with respect to successful strategies for accomplishing deep improvements across the province. Our job now is to harness this intelligence and motivation to engage all

stakeholders in a common pursuit that will take us to levels of achievement never before attained. The emphasis must be on focus, rigor and coherence that extend our successful achievement. Current priorities and focused innovation are entirely compatible, and must be made so. This is the agenda of the next phase.

What Ontario educators and leaders have accomplished in the last nine years is truly remarkable and impressive on a world scale. Yet it is also disturbingly precarious without the focused innovation required for excellence.

The world is watching. Our children are wanting. We need to opt for excellence.

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