

Grade expectations

The Liberals are promising to pump an additional \$2.6 billion into education over the next four years and to raise math and reading test results to 70 per cent. Forgive us—us being battle-scarred parents, students and educators—but we'll believe it when we see it

ASK ANYONE WITH KIDS IN Ontario's education system what their local school needs, and you'll get a laundry list: books for the library, music and phys-ed programs, upgraded computers, caretakers to keep the place clean, more special-ed classes, sod for the soccer field, paint for the walls. The essential ingredients that make schools work.

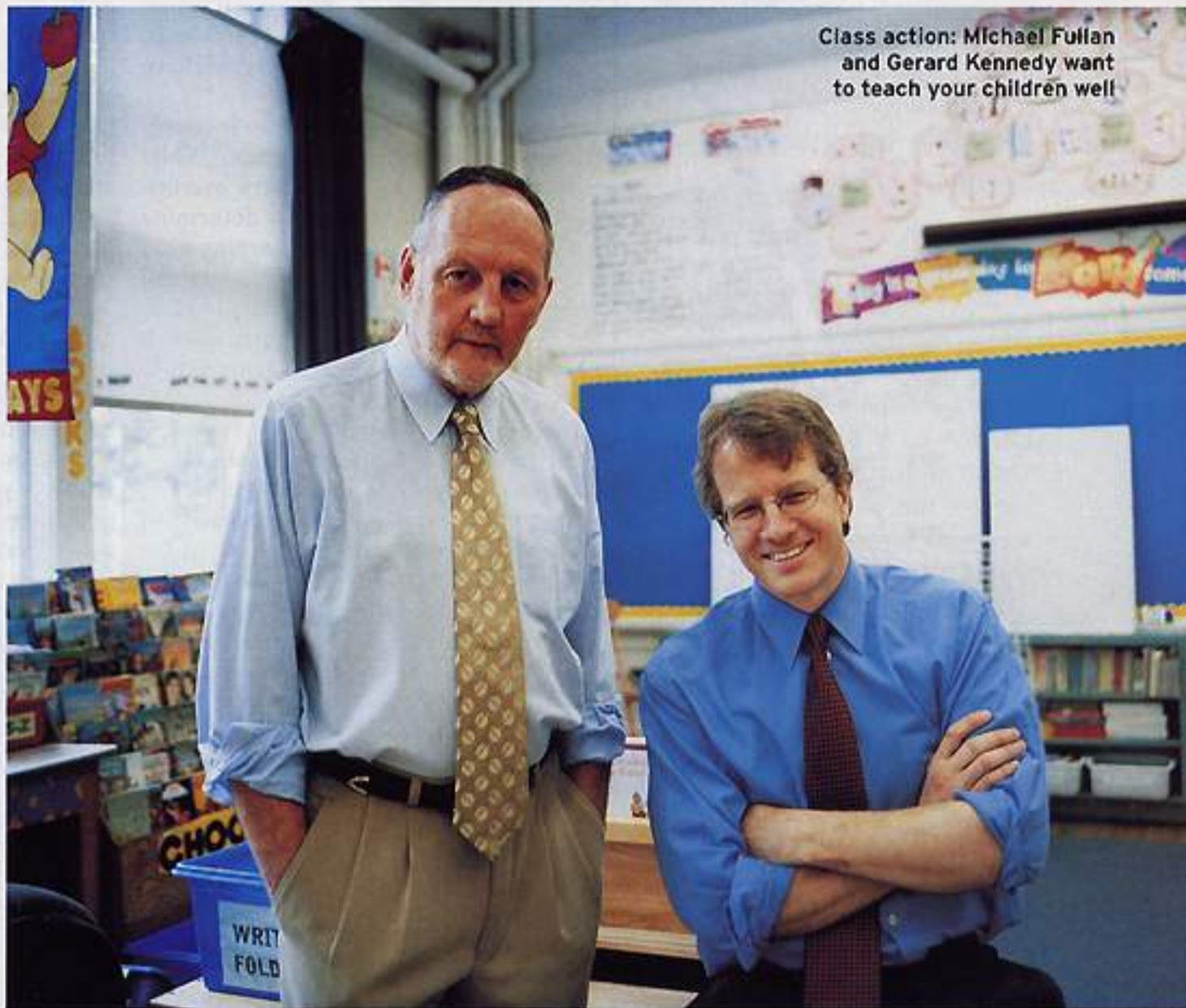
But what anxious parents and students will also say is that their schools need a breather. Since 1996, Ontario's education system has been the subject of one of the most disruptive reforms ever unleashed on a public institution in this province. The Tories reprogrammed governance, funding, curriculum, labour relations, management, accountability and infrastructure. Their solutions yielded some dubious results. Between 1995 and 2003, enrolment at private schools grew by 32,000 kids. More than a quarter of all teens are not graduating from high school, either because they're failing academically or opting to drop out. And aging schools are crumbling because, in the name of focusing spending on the classroom, the Tories slashed the funding needed to repair them.

Dalton McGuinty rode to victory last fall by promising to restore stability, and the Liberals have been attempting to make good on that pledge. Since the spring budget, Queen's Park has earmarked \$2.6 billion for new education funding over the next four years. But McGuinty says this isn't just about topping up the tank. He wants three-quarters of Grade 6 students to score at least 70 per cent on standardized math

and reading tests by 2008; currently, just over half achieve that result. To get the rest there, the premier called on internationally renowned education expert Michael Fullan, former dean of OISE, to help teachers and school boards boost academic achievement. It sounds good on paper, but can Fullan deliver reform to a reformed-out system?

LAST JUNE, EDUCATION MINISTER GERARD Kennedy, the boyish MPP for Parkdale-High Park, embarked on a road trip around the province to promote what will become the cornerstone of McGuinty's first-term record. The government finally had something encouraging to talk about.

Kennedy's four-year package includes new money for a range of offerings, from school buses to services for at-risk children (poverty and learning disabilities are the biggest factors). To cut class sizes from kindergarten to Grade 3 to 20 kids or fewer, he allocated \$90 million for 1,100 new teachers. And he established a \$200-million amortization fund to help boards cover the borrowing costs on \$2 billion in overdue repairs and renovations. In total, Ontario's education budget will grow to \$16.3 billion in this school year. That's an increase of \$928 million, or \$500 per student. The Tories injected just \$1.4 billion in new annual funding between 1996 and 2002—scarcely



Class action: Michael Fullan and Gerard Kennedy want to teach your children well

enough to keep up with inflation.

Cynical voters remember the Conservatives making big education announcements but delivering few tangible results. Kennedy vows the Liberals' additional funding will be "conspicuous." In Toronto, 10,000 children with severe literacy and numeracy problems already began receiving intensive tutoring last summer under a pilot project. There's also new money for community and youth groups using school facilities. "Education has alienated the very people who need to know what's going on," he says. "If voters don't start to have increased confidence this fall, I suspect that next fall you'll have a new education minister."

Rebuilding public confidence is clearly Kennedy's toughest challenge. While some of Harris's reforms were overdue (such as finding a way to determine whether kids were actually learning what they were being taught), the common thread was speed at the expense of planning—repeated doses of shock therapy that permanently unnerved hundreds of thousands of parents. The Tories overhauled the curriculum before new teaching materials became available. They eliminated Grade 13 without figuring out what to do with the double cohort. Then they imposed standardized testing for Grades 3, 6, 9 and 10—a move that put Ontario in line with the rest of North America, but which remains controversial among some parents and educators who consider the tests a blunt instrument for measuring academic achievement.

On the money end, the Tories revised the funding formulas, while eliminating school trustees' taxing powers and amalgamating boards across the province. The Toronto District School Board lost a staggering \$300 million from its budget between 1998 and March 2004. Meanwhile, dozens of small or underenrolled schools were closed. The fiscal squeeze precipitated bitter labour wars, which left thousands of high school students with long interruptions to their schooling and few extracurricular activities.

The whole cascading mess started to resemble someone with multiple organ failure. People for Education, the watchdog group that has been tracking the decay, identified such morbidity symptoms as shuttered school libraries, long waiting lists for special education and counselling, and sharp increases in school fundraising (which means a wider gap between the have and have-not schools). Boards in Toronto, Ottawa and Hamilton began making politically radioactive choices, such as approving deficit bud-

gets, closing pools and charging exorbitant fees to community groups seeking to use school facilities for sports programs. The capping outrage was Jim Flaherty's bid to introduce a private school tax credit, a move that provided a convenient exit strategy for middle and upper-income parents.

In May 2002, unable to ignore growing public pressure, Premier Ernie Eves appointed University of Guelph president Mordechai Rozanski to review the funding formula. Rozanski's report, delivered seven months later, was an unambiguous indictment, confirming what unions, trustees and parent groups had been saying all along: the government was strangling the system. He concluded that Ontario's schools needed \$1.8 billion in extra funding per year, bringing the provincial outlay up to an annual \$14 billion.

When the Liberals took office last fall, McGuinty promptly repealed the controversial tax credit, which was, in effect, a subsidy for private schools. But he has no plans to tamper with standardized testing, which is now entrenched in the system, and he won't reinstate the trustees' taxing powers, meaning Queen's Park intends to retain full financial control over purse strings. Kennedy has his officials working to make the formula and board budgets less opaque, so Queen's Park can confirm to voters that all the extra dollars announced last May and June will be allocated to priority areas. He promises that by the end of the 2005–2006 school year, more than 80 per cent of Rozanski's recommendations will have been implemented.

IF KENNEDY IS MR. MONEYBAGS, MICHAEL Fullan, the premier's special adviser on education, is the guy in charge of delivering the grades—that is boosting Ontario's mediocre reading and math scores. At 63, he's an all-star academic with enormous clout among many politicians and educators. He is media savvy, restless and peripatetic—a headlining act on the global education conference circuit as well as a top-level adviser to education officials in Britain, the U.S. and Australia. He's often described as a school improvement guru, and his ideas sit well with governments trying to revamp their systems without resorting to the neo-con agenda of charter schools. The title of his best-selling 2002 manifesto, *Change Forces With a Vengeance*, speaks volumes.

Fullan's preoccupations are how to make individual schools function cohesively (in many schools, the teaching staff work in isolation); how to make teachers teach effectively; and how to run

boards so that the bureaucrats encourage, rather than stifle, school initiative. In a field notorious for bafflegab, Fullan fashions himself a plain speaker. His approach is fairly straightforward. He lays out ways for teachers to work together, and he is an outspoken proponent of preschool programs (too many kids arrive at kindergarten having never been read to or not knowing the alphabet). He also thinks principals need to be much more than just managers: they have to shape their school's programs and help their teachers be more effective.

To put his ideas into practice, Fullan will set up an elite numeracy and literacy "secretariat" that will function as a flying consulting squad to the boards. He wants each elementary school—especially those where kids are experiencing academic difficulties—to create a leadership team (the principal and two hand-picked teachers) to train their colleagues in progressive techniques for teaching reading and math. The secretariat will then scout out approaches that have produced results in the field and promote them to other boards. It will also work with boards to dispatch "turnaround teams" to shake up particularly moribund schools. The point of the exercise, Fullan stresses, is to encourage well-informed improvisation within the schools rather than impose changes from on high. "It won't just be the centre determining everything."

The Liberals have invested \$160 million in Fullan's plan for the current school year, money that will go to literacy-oriented reading resources, smaller primary classes, special education programs, and a literacy screening test that will be "heavily recommended" for all kids in senior kindergarten and is intended to identify children with potential reading problems very early on.

McGuinty and Kennedy's faith in Fullan isn't unwarranted. In the late 1990s, Tony Blair executed a similar campaign in Britain, bringing in a team of experts, including Fullan, to jolt British schools out of five decades of mediocrity. Test scores there rose steadily, and about 75 per cent of kids now score at an acceptable level. The Liberals are hoping the Blair experiment can be replicated in Ontario, which has a few advantages over Britain. Even after years of Tory rule, our public schools are far healthier than their British counterparts: our system isn't infected by ancient class and ethnic animosities, and our cities don't experience the extremes of working-class poverty that still typify industrial England. Prior to the reforms, the British sys-

tem was more akin to that of public boards in American inner cities, where drastic problems have prompted the introduction of charter schools and vouchers, and the takeover of bankrupt school districts by municipal governments.

No one quibbles with the need to arm teachers with the best methods to deliver curriculum—the pedagogical equivalent of a doctor keeping up with the medical journals. But just because Fullan has sexy ideas doesn't mean that they will be adopted, or even recognized, down at the school level. There, his reforms will square off against some lacklustre teachers set in their ways, tentative principals inching toward retirement and aggressive parent groups pursuing their own agendas. And he may also have to account for why a few of his ideas seem to reinvent the wheel: his "literacy leaders" will be asked to do what teacher-librarians have long done—at least until the Tories' funding formula caused the closure of many school libraries and the elimination of scores of teacher-librarian jobs.

Labour relations could prove to be Fullan's most daunting impediment. Across the province, teachers' and education workers' unions are going into contract negotiations, and work-to-rule actions are already being planned. Though bargaining is done at the board level, the Liberals' funding transfers provided just \$236 million for salary hikes—which, depending on who you ask, works out to a modest two per cent at best. (Rozanski had recommended \$675 million.) That rate barely covers inflation, much less the steadily rising cost of benefits packages.

The Liberals won power by assiduously courting the teachers' unions and promising voters an end to disruptions (there were more than 370 strike days between 1995 and 2003). Since the beginning of this year, they've wooed teachers by repealing the Tories' hated mandatory teacher training legislation and promising to fund additional professional development programs geared to Fullan's agenda. But will all that icing, plus two per cent, buy a new contract? Back in the summer, Kennedy was touchy on this topic, saying adamantly, "I don't accept there's going to be big problems this fall."

But if Kennedy's wrong, Fullan's grand scheme to boost scores goes up in smoke. "An era of labour peace is a critical context," Fullan says, because his ability to improve the effectiveness of schools is predicated on buy-in from energized teachers functioning in positive working environments. Everyone remembers the

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picket lines, the cancelled programs and the sullen mood that settled over the schools like bad air on a smog-alert day. It has taken years for the morale problems to begin to subside.

This is where Fullan's rock-star popularity among educators comes in handy. He has close ties to the profession, having taught thousands of teachers at OISE and in schools. In the late 1990s, in fact, the Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation commissioned Fullan and another OISE professor, Andy Hargreaves, to write *What's Worth Fighting For*, a three-volume call to arms.

The education workers' union is more of a wild card. John Weatherup, president of CUPE Local 4400—whose 11,000 members are employed by the TDSB as secretaries, teaching assistants, caretakers and the like—is regarded as a loose cannon, even among some education activists. He's been threatening work action since the spring. But the last time CUPE 4400 workers went on strike, in 2001, they were ordered back to work. "Our members are gun shy," he says. After three strikes and eight years of turmoil, the public sympathy well has run dry.

WITH OR WITHOUT LABOUR STRIFE, FULLAN and Kennedy both insist that Ontarians must be patient: it takes two to four years for an individual school to implement Fullan's reforms to the point where staff and parents begin seeing a reduction in the gap between high- and low-performing kids. By 2008, an election year, we'll know whether the government's 75 per cent goal was realistic.

But there are crucial indicators besides standardized tests. People for Education produces an annual status report on school programs across Ontario. Its seventh survey, released last June, revealed a distressing new trend that will need to be arrested before anyone can legitimately claim victory. As of this fall, the TDSB has seen its enrolment levels plunge by an estimated seven per cent—that's more than 19,000 kids since 2001–2002. The board's demographic analysts are trying to determine why, and the suspected culprits include private schools; a lack of affordable housing, forcing families out of the city; and a declining birth rate. The fact is that many parents make housing choices based on the quality of the local school, so declining enrolment is, in part, a no-confidence vote from families who were too fed up or scared to stick it out in Toronto's public system. Turn that trend around, and then we can talk about giving Fullan and Kennedy a passing grade. ■