

Tory education policy given a failing grade [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

During almost eight years in office, the Conservative government has been regularly attacked over its education policies. But the government has successfully fended off most of the attacks by questioning the motivations or qualifications of its attackers .

Last week, however, came a scathing report the government will have more difficulty sloughing off. The report -- billed as an "audit" of the government's education policies -- was authored by three distinguished academics at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE).

The three are Michael Fullan, dean of OISE; Kenneth Leithwood, associate dean of research; and Nancy Watson, senior research associate.

All three have impeccable credentials, but it is Fullan who stands out. An internationally renowned expert and author in the field of education reform, his advice has been sought by governments around the world, including Tony Blair's regime in Britain. Now, the Tories have his advice in the form of this report, entitled "The schools we need".

The government will actually welcome some of the report's findings -- and critics like the teachers' unions will not. For example, the report endorses the government's introduction of province-wide testing and a tougher curriculum.

The report identifies three "glaring" gaps in the government's education policies: early childhood education (to get kids started on the right foot), support for beginning teachers, and programs to develop leaders in the system.

Overall, the OISE report provides us with a timely and useful critique of government education policies and neatly complements Rozanski's report, which dealt solely with financing issues.

Just throwing more money at education is not enough. The government also has to change its overall strategy and tactics in the field.

Will the government take this advice? Education Minister Elizabeth Witmer said last week that she will read the report and follow up with a meeting with Fullan and his colleagues. "I've always had a tremendous respect for the work done by OISE and by Dr. Fullan," she said.

Witmer is a former teacher and school board chair with a reputation for being open-minded. But on this particular file she is dealing with entrenched interests, both inside the Conservative party and in her own bureaucracy.

As well, the relationship between the government and the teachers may have been damaged beyond repair.

It may take more than a change of heart by the minister, then, to bring about the changes recommended by Fullan et al. It may take a change of government.

- reprinted from The Toronto Star.

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