

Record on education is Ontario Premier's best case for re-election ^[1]

Author: Radwanski, Adam

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EXCERPTS

If Dalton McGuinty's campaign team is smart, a veteran Liberal offered recently, the Ontario Premier will be doing photo-ops in schools as often as humanly possible between now and next fall's provincial election.

It is sound advice. As other parts of his record come under attack, the education system increasingly looks like Mr. McGuinty's best case for re-election.

Mr. McGuinty has long sought to cast himself as Ontario's "education premier," or at least the heir to Bill Davis on that front. In part, it's a branding exercise meant to appeal to the Liberals' target demographic - female voters aged roughly 30 to 55. But a flurry of international accolades in late 2010 demonstrated that there's some substance to it as well.

The love-in began in September, when Arne Duncan, U.S. President Barack Obama's education czar, showered praise while in Toronto for a summit hosted by Mr. McGuinty. Proclaiming himself a "huge fan" of the Premier's education policies, he expressed his admiration for both the "level of innovation" in the province's classrooms and the new full-day kindergarten program.

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The icing on the cake came in early December, when the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) released rankings of 15-year-olds' academic performance. They showed Ontario performing well above the Canadian average, catching up to Alberta (which had previously led the country) and trailing only Shanghai in literacy.

Although Ontario's results hadn't significantly changed since 2006, the last time the data were collected, the province was singled out in a video highlighting what made it one of the world's best systems, including its promotion of innovation and its successful integration of foreign-born students. The video's introduction features Andreas Schleicher, the head of the OECD's Indicators and Analysis Division, enthusing about the province's "strong central leadership" and how "the McGuinty government worked tirelessly" to build a sense of common purpose.

Naturally, a few caveats are in order.

Some of the reforms that impress international observers were launched under Mr. McGuinty's predecessors; the province's standardized testing program, for example, was recommended by a commission appointed by Bob Rae's NDP, and put in place by Mike Harris's Conservatives.

It will also be a while before the impact of Mr. McGuinty's education efforts is entirely known. The educational value of full-day kindergarten won't be measurable until long after he's gone from office. And the recent international testing couldn't even fully measure the impact of reforms implemented during his first term, because today's high-school students were already partway through their education by then.

But Mr. McGuinty did not just happen to be in the right place at the right time.

Part of his success, true, is due to labour peace that didn't come cheap. But he also invested a great deal of effort in improving the learning culture - setting core priorities, establishing a Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to work directly with schools, continually developing the skills of teachers, making better use of the standardized testing data, and establishing a greater degree of accountability without putting every administrator perpetually on the defensive.

In many of these policies, and in enlisting the help of education guru Michael Fullan, Mr. McGuinty followed the lead of former British prime minister Tony Blair. But there's a notable difference. Mr. Blair was distracted during his second term, by both the Iraq war and other domestic priorities. Mr. McGuinty, cautioned by Mr. Fullan how quickly progress can erode, has managed to maintain some momentum.

The next big test, beyond the somewhat messy rollout of full-day kindergarten, will be how that focus informs Mr. McGuinty's re-election platform. Sources say that will likely include targeting boys' literacy (which lags well behind girls'), improving performance in science, and getting more high-end students into elite status.

If that can translate into policies that parents can wrap their heads around, it will allow Mr. McGuinty to spend more time during the

campaign talking about his favourite subject. Even that might not be enough to get him a third term; a premier has to be judged on more than just one file. But if education policy winds up being set by someone else, they'll have a lot to live up to.

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