

Politicians can't take credit for high marks

By Debora Kelly

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Leading up to his Oct. 6 re-election, Dalton McGuinty repeatedly reminded us he is the self-professed Education Premier.

(I fondly call him the Teachers Union Premier, given a propensity for pricey policies that maintain labour peace by boosting the fortunes of teachers unions, including commitments on class sizes, kindergarten and teacher prep time.)

"In schools all over Ontario, test scores are up, class sizes are down, more students are graduating and there's been eight years of peace and stability," crowed the premier.

Under the Liberals, education spending has increased by more than \$6 billion since 2003, to \$20 billion in 2009/10. Education has joined health care in the bottomless black hole of expenses in our have-not province, accounting for the bulk of the McGuinty government's current \$114-billion spending spree.

It's fair, then, to expect improvement in student achievement, not just teachers' salaries and benefits.

Note that since 2003, our public schools serve 90,000 fewer students. Private education is still booming.

In his first mandate, Mr. McGuinty promised 75 per cent of Ontario students would meet or exceed standards on standardized tests. He couldn't keep the promise, then or now.

However, results are up. In 2003, 54 per cent of students met or exceeded the standard; today, it's 68 per cent.

It's fair to note, however, the 2003 test is different from the 2011 test.

Critics allege the modest improvements are due to a manipulation of the testing process. The length of time of the test has been slashed by half, multiple choice questions have increased and students can use calculators. More teachers "teach the test" before the actual test.

The Liberals also lowered the academic requirements for a high school diploma, which may account for the 14-per-cent increase in graduates.

You can't deny our international achievement in reading; in the OECD's recent standardized test on literacy, Ontario 15-year-old students ranked in the top 10 of 65 jurisdictions, topping students in Japan and Singapore.



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However, international achievement also occurred under the previous Conservative government's revised curriculum: Ontario moved into the top 10 with Singapore, Korea and Hong Kong in Grade 4 math and science in 2003.

While the province's 2011 EQAO results show grades 3 and 6 students have made gains in reading and writing, math is another story. There has been no improvement in the last five years; in fact, it dropped by 1 per cent for Grade 6 students to 58 per cent.

The good news is 83 per cent of Grade 9 students taking academic math are making the grade — the only group making good on Mr. McGuinty's long-ago promise. Yet a mere 42 per cent of Grade 9 students in applied math meet or exceed standards.

What about the other 58 per cent of these kids? And the many in elementary school below standards? I didn't hear the answer on the campaign trail — full-day kindergarten and smaller primary classes won't help them.

As for the achievement improvement we've seen, the reality is parents who can afford it are paying extra to ensure their children not only make the grade, but excel. The education system alone isn't doing it.

Even if we have to scrimp, we're hiring tutors — I am and so are most parents in my circle. We'll do whatever we can to help our kids. In fact, one in three parents is paying a tutor, says the

Canadian Council on Learning.

The booming tuition industry reflects this trend, with children as young as five signed up with franchises such as Kumon, Sylvan and Oxford at hundreds of sites across the province, at \$40 to \$70 an hour.

Our kids are achieving — though still not enough of them — not because of politicians, but because of skilled and caring teachers and tutors, supportive parents and their own commitment.

Let's give credit where it is due.

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