



## **SECONDARY REFORM**

### **OPSOA Speaks – September 1996**

#### **Reform of Secondary Education in Ontario**

A position prepared and approved by The Ontario Public Supervisory Officials' Association (OPSOA)

OPSOA and Educational Reform OPSOA is a dynamic organization of administrative leaders of education in Ontario whose roles as directors and superintendents are, in large measure, defined by the Education Act and Regulations of the Province and the policies of elected trustees who make up Boards of Education. These school system administrators are charged with the implementation of government policy and with the monitoring of program effectiveness in the schools. As an organization, OPSOA is committed to recognizing the needs of students and to sharing the experience of its Members. When the Ontario government through the Ministry of Education and Training reaches consensus on what is to be included in curriculum, supervisory officers in school systems are those who set up processes to deliver and evaluate the learning in the public schools of the province.

Consequently, Members of OPSOA are very concerned when the Ontario government announces a major reform of secondary education in this province and neglects to hold meaningful consultation to develop a comprehensive rationale for the foundation for change with those who daily operate the system and provide for the learning needs of so many students and teachers. Such an announcement is viewed as exciting and an excellent opportunity to improve the educational system through new directions. For the supervisory officials today there is a fear that the reform may not be realistic and that what is proposed may ignore realities of delivery. Experience in corporate and public planning systems has shown that it is essential to consult with those who have solved the problems of delivery in the past and to tap their advice when planning for the future.

#### **Review and/or Reform?**

OPSOA quite agrees with the need for a review of secondary education in this province – both its curriculum and its delivery structure. In the past fifteen years many new and changing factors challenge today's schools in preparing students for the future. It is timely to assess these carefully to more fully

understand their potential impacts on the future learning need of the province's students. Among those influences the following are representative:

- the emergence of a global society
- the amazing advances in technology which impact on society today
- the increasing desire to involve business, industry and the community in the processes of education
- growing demands for standards and accountability
- an increasing multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual component of Ontario society
- the demand for flexibility and accommodation of special learning needs
- the changing values, needs and lifestyles of families

Since the Minister's announcements about the government's intentions to change both the delivery and curriculum of secondary education it appears that the normal or expected processes of review are being ignored and that from the outset proposals for reform/change are being prepared by a limited few. OPSOA is concerned that a review process with a built-in accountability framework has not occurred – the foundation which should focus the change decisions has not been developed, and that, besides the education community, business, industry, parents and the larger public have not had input to a consensus on the need for change, and the fundamental principles of effective secondary education on which the specifics of reform can be rationalized.

To date the process of developing documents for reform of secondary education has been far removed from the public eye and only a very few senior officials have had any part in the consultation. The proposed consultation this fall will not address the problem being raised here.

The opportunity to do it right is within our abilities. A comprehensive review process must precede the development of reform proposals – a rationale for change must be evident to all, particularly those charged ultimately with the responsibility for implementation. OPSOA is not suggesting lengthy processes which would delay the government's timelines. However, a couple of months to develop a consensus on eight to ten fundamental principles for development and delivery changes would increase the chances for reform success and commitment.

### **OPSOA Initiates the Review Debate**

In an attempt to encourage the consultative process, OPSOA hosted a forum on Secondary Reform on July 3, 1996 in response to the pleas of its members. Secondary school principals have expressed a similar frustration and a desire to have input to reform. Fifty directors and superintendents and twenty-five principals from across the province attended this one day workshop which dealt with principles and applications of secondary education. Participants began by articulating fundamental principles as parameters of reform. Then the study

groups applied these principles to specific areas: program, special needs students, accountability, delivery structures, assessment, implementation, instructional practices and common curriculum.

As a result of this session and other subsequent discussions, this paper on secondary reform has been approved by the Board of Directors of the Ontario Public Supervisory Officials' Association. This is not a challenge to any documents to be issued through the Ministry of Education; it is intended to be supportive of Ministry initiatives. However, this paper expresses some views which the senior supervisory officials feel must be considered carefully by government at a time of reform

### **Fundamental Principles for the Development and Delivery of Secondary Education**

The Secondary School Reform Forum held on July 3, 1996 framed six broad principles which OPSOA sees as an essential foundation for appropriate and successful secondary reform. A more comprehensive process for input would refine these six and may well identify others. A consensus on a set of manageable principles is vital.

#### **Access to secondary education should be based on principles of universality and equitability.**

There has never been a greater need for a secondary school certificate. Given the diversity of Ontario students, there is need for diverse paths to the diploma. The school principal should have flexibility in allowing a variety of methods for completing secondary school studies. The principle of equitability applied to access includes both learning resources and facilities, and suggests that distribution of these must take into account differing needs, to arrive at a fair and equal access to the diploma. Students with exceptional learning needs may require greater per capita expenditures to achieve the same end. School boards in all communities must have the resources to serve the full spectrum of needs and exceptionalities. Modifications of program must be clearly reflected in the diploma so that, even though the diploma is common, modifications which are of interest to employers and educational and training institutions are communicated. Teacher pre-service, in-service and program modification must be practical to allow for the handling of diverse needs.

To accommodate this diversity of students across Ontario, schools must offer a broad choice of alternatives in program. Advice to students should guide their choices based on skills and clear assessment results. The role of personal guidance grows more important each year in steering a diverse group of students through an increasingly complex set of alternative programs.

#### **Pupil achievement and system accountability measures should be based on a clearly stated set of outcomes.**

Ontario has recently developed a Common Curriculum for grades 1 through 9 which is outcomes-based. OPSOA endorses that focus and calls for a complete extension of this structure to secondary education. Such a plan when put in place will provide an effective accountability structure where:

- graduate outcomes are clearly defined and matched with the Common Curriculum expectations
- schools are held accountable for delivery of the graduate outcomes
- graduate outcomes are the measure of achievement freeing students from rigid and sometimes unrealistic time requirements
- assessment and reporting of student achievement is based on mastery of the stated outcomes

**Schools must be designed to meet the learning needs of students and to recognize community expectations.**

As supervisory officials, Members of OPSOA believe that the schools of Ontario must provide a balance of concern for intellectual, emotional, physical, social and cultural needs. There must be a true degree of consistency of program from school to school to satisfy the need for portability so that students whose families move throughout the province can maintain appropriate achievement.

Schools today must insist that all students achieve both conventional and technological literacy. This will necessitate the support and development of resource materials and staff development programs for teachers whose mastery may be lacking.

OPSOA expects that when reform documents are produced they will consider carefully the inclusion of:

- mentoring programs and advisor programs which give clear assistance to students in choosing and maintaining realistic educational directions based on achievement
- continued development of integrated multidisciplinary instruction emphasizing for students that the whole school experience has relevance
- varied assessment techniques including such practical techniques as portfolios and demonstrations
- reporting that is detailed and meets the expectations of parents
- student groupings that are designed to provide a positive school climate experience
- As well, OPSOA expects that school reform will allow for greater flexibility in the use of school buildings, staff and resources. The new secondary school structure must provide flexible entry dates, a redefined school year and a more flexible school day based upon research and input from all of the learning partners.

**The development and delivery of educational services to young people should be part of an integrated community service.**

OPSOA supports development of learning partnerships in consultation with various members of the community. Boards of Education must develop community study committees to determine which partnerships are most effective in the delivery of educational services for student needs.

At the same time, supervisory officials welcome clarification of what boards of education are expected to provide in terms of health and social services to students.

**The single most significant resource in effective learning continues to be the positive teacher who interacts with the student to direct the learning.**

Years of experience and current research have led to this belief and to the conviction that effective change is impossible without adequate training and retraining of staff. Students and parents reinforce this belief in their reporting of successes and failures in the education system.

This premise is apparent for all levels of students: those preparing for university and those going directly to the workplace. Studies of exemplary schools continue to point to the significance of the excellent teacher.

If we subscribe to the philosophy that the purpose of schools is to inspire and develop students as individuals and as lifelong learners and contributors to a global society, then we must ensure that any reform process considers fully what is necessary to make teachers effective in their work. It must identify and provide for the training needed to provide new skills.

**Evaluation of the reform process must be based on the achievement of designated outcomes.**

The secondary school reform process must be based on specific criteria from the outset. The principles outlined in this paper are examples of such criteria.

OPSOA expects that the government will show true commitment to reform by putting in place a measurement instrument that will ensure effective implementation across the province with incentives and consequences as deemed appropriate.

Each board must then determine a system of measurement to be able to show that a provincial standard has been achieved.

**Current Challenges to Effectiveness**

Supervisory Officials have identified on many occasions a number of major concerns with the present direction of secondary education. Effectiveness has been challenged by the following:

- financial cutbacks which do not allow recognition of program needs
- radical downsizing of support services at board and Ministry levels
- lack of clear planning for change which recognizes the components of research, staff training and proper time lines
- unrealistic political expectations on the ability of boards to provide all programs for all students although resources continue to shrink
- need for clear certificate designation and a clear understanding of same in society
- inadequate provision for adult learners at a time when employment requires major retraining and reschooling of worker
- lack of direction for a regular provincial standard for handling of non-achievement
- impacts of compressing five years of secondary into four without the announcement of an overall plan for the design of the K-12 years of school.
- neglect of a comprehensive teacher training/retraining program which should run parallel to any major reform
- Members of the Ontario Public Supervisory Officials' Association view these concerns as major items to be resolved in the process of secondary school reform.

### **Expectations of Reform**

The supervisory officials of the province, through OPSOA, have identified some specific areas where changes are required to the current delivery mechanisms for secondary education. Any reform should address the following:

- improved student retention and reentry - reform of secondary program must provide a new flexibility for students to complete diploma requirements
- competency in a package of new basics including literacy, numeracy and technology identified for all students
- new procedures to enhance communication with parents keeping them highly informed of student progress and student weaknesses
- changes in reporting to parents must correct problems which have existed and restore public faith in measurement of student achievement
- a specific plan for use of technology to enhance instruction and provide access to information
- close coordination of secondary learning outcomes with what employment sectors believe are learning priorities.

### **OPSOA Expects**

It is not acceptable for such a significant change as secondary reform to be developed without a broader, more comprehensive provincial debate. The public expressions of concern in the recent years cannot be changed without the development of a wide consensus on the purposes of secondary education, the fundamental principles on which the secondary program will be developed and delivered and the ways in which we will measure success down the road. OPSOA does not see this foundation being prepared and is concerned that

"change for the sake of change" focused on cost reduction has become the only objective of the reform exercise. It is disconcerting that the lack of effective "front-end" planning will jeopardize seriously the effective implementation of any proposed changes. This is particularly distressing to those of us who understand the significant relationship between effective education and the economy of this province and Canada. Reform papers written without broad input and prepared remotely from the secondary systems that they will structure are not acceptable and cannot be expected to be implemented. Rather than following the process now under way, OPSOA asks the Minister, without unduly changing critical timelines, to review and expand that process and take action on the following:

**Publish a well developed rationale for change.**

Such rationale should recognize that the schools of Ontario continue to serve well the great majority of students who graduate and achieve at a very high level in the demanding and fast-moving world of today. The record is clear on this. Current reform should focus on the learning needs of the 60% of Ontario's students who do not attend universities. Ontario's schools are good places of learning but they have need of review if they are to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

OPSOA recognizes the urgency of review and development of new directions and asks to be a working partner in this significant change. We are prepared to provide leadership. OPSOA states further that a rationale for such major change must be clearly articulated after true consultation with all of the learning partners involved in implementation. If the true purpose of reform is to improve learning, then agreement is needed on the definition of what is important to learners. Arriving at such a definition must involve principals, teachers and supervisory officers as well as all other partners in the learning process across this province.

Include a concentrated study of the report of the Royal Commission on Learning and take from it the many ideas developed over two years of public hearings and input. This study contains considerable reference and research to support specific changes which are outlined in the recommendations.

**Recognize local board limitations.**

Ontario is diverse in terms of educational resources and change must recognize these practical limitations. Those working on the theory of what is to be learned in a reformed secondary system must consult with board of education management for a realistic measurement of what can be offered with present staff and facilities.

**Improve technological support from the outset.**

The government has stated its desire to improve technological assistance to learning. Such plans, which allow considerable local flexibility, must be communicated clearly to support reform.

### **Increase leadership expertise in the Ministry of Education.**

This Ministry has downsized and removed support to boards over the past several years. The result is inadequate professional guidance and expertise to implement a major initiative such as secondary reform. It is not reasonable to assume that an inexperienced and understaffed Ministry can develop an improved decision making process as well as monitor and assist in the implementation of such a major change.

### **Examine the use of differentiated staffing within schools.**

A study must consider the alternative uses of practicing teachers and teachers in pre-service programs as well as the utilization of non-teacher resources. Current teacher staffing ratios and class size provisions are questionable in a new delivery system focused on student learning needs and effective instructional practices which match the available resources of the twenty-first century.

## **Conclusion**

The public supervisory officials of Ontario are ready to welcome the challenges of planned, rational, consensus-building secondary school reform. The time for reform is right and the public expectations of the education system demand it. As school system supervisory officials responsible for successful implementation of reform, we are saying:

- Reform must be fully consultative to make it practical and realistic and to develop a comprehensive provincial commitment. Supervisory officials as the province's professional education leaders and significant advocates for students must be highly involved in the process. Secondary school teachers and administrators must also be considered major players in this consultation.
- Reform must be "end to end" throughout the system in order to produce a new improved learning climate continuum, K-12
- The depletion of support and expertise resources in the Ministry of Education and Training and within school systems seriously diminishes the opportunity for effective change of this proposed magnitude. Government must recognize that successful implementation of change requires staff as partners and mentors with the necessary skills and expertise to guide, advise, direct, monitor and supervise teachers. Ignoring this reality of effective implementation processes will significantly decrease the chances of success.
- The potential for effective change must include reasonable timelines. Once set, appropriate resources, both human and material, must be directed to

ensure that these timelines are met. OPSOA has seen little evidence of this to date.

OPSOA stands ready to lead secondary school reform in Ontario. We have the expertise and skills for successful implementation. We await the call to participate actively at an early and meaningful level.