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Tuesday 13 June 2006

Mardi 13 juin 2006

Speaker
Honourable Michael A. Brown

Président
L'honorable Michael A. Brown

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Tuesday 13 June 2006

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Mardi 13 juin 2006

The House met at 1845.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

EDUCATION STATUTE LAW
AMENDMENT ACT
(LEARNING TO AGE 18), 2006
LOI DE 2006 MODIFIANT DES LOIS
EN CE QUI CONCERNE L'ÉDUCATION
(APPRENTISSAGE JUSQU'À L'ÂGE
DE 18 ANS)

Resuming the debate adjourned on June 12, 2006, on the motion for second reading of Bill 52, An Act to amend the Education Act respecting pupil learning to the age of 18 and equivalent learning and to make complementary amendments to the Highway Traffic Act/ Projet de loi 52, Loi modifiant la Loi sur l'éducation concernant l'apprentissage des élèves jusqu'à l'âge de 18 ans et l'apprentissage équivalent et apportant des modifications complémentaires au Code de la route.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Maria Van Bommel): Further debate? I believe the member for Trinity–Spadina has the floor.

Mr. Rosario Marchese (Trinity–Spadina): First of all, I just want to welcome the citizens of Ontario to this parliamentary channel. It's a quarter to seven, Tuesday, June 13, and we are on live, and please stay tuned. I've got a whole hour to pass on some information to you that may be of interest to you. I know that at this moment there is no soccer game going on, so this is a good opportunity to watch the parliamentary channel. I know how hard it would be if I were there and there was a soccer game—Italy-Brazil, let us say, as an example—because I'd be hard-pressed to watch the parliamentary channel versus a game between Italy and Brazil—hard-pressed. We are on live, giving you this opportunity, before the 8 o'clock repeats of world soccer, to just get a glimpse of what's going on here in the Legislature.

I've got to tell you, it's been so busy in this House. This Liberal government is keeping us so busy passing bill after bill, not giving too much time for debate, so we've been here sweating it out every day. I haven't had an opportunity to see too many games, and I would have loved to have seen the Brazil-Croatia game today, because Brazil is a beautiful team. Dave, are you familiar with Ronaldinho? Are you, Peter? Are you familiar with

Ronaldinho? Such a nifty player, I'm telling you. It's hard to mark that player. It's beauty on the field just to watch him play.

Hon. James J. Bradley (Minister of Tourism, minister responsible for seniors, Government House Leader): Poetry in motion.

Mr. Marchese: It is poetry in motion. Unlike this place, which is the worst of all prose, soccer is poetry, and some of those players—just to watch them is beautiful. And Ronaldinho is a very difficult player to mark, just gracefully moving from one side to the other; beautiful, isn't it?

But listen. The repeats are on tonight, so those of you who missed the Croatia-Brazil game, I hope that's the one that's on tonight at 8:00. Please watch it. It's a pretty interesting game.

You, Madam Speaker, want me to talk about Bill 52, correct? I thought you did. I've got a whole lot of time just to talk about this bill. Bill 52, just to explain it, is called An Act to amend the Education Act respecting pupil learning to the age of 18 and equivalent learning and to make complementary amendments to the Highway Traffic Act. That's what this Liberal bill is and does, and I tell you that this New Democrat and all New Democrats are opposed to this bill, have spoken against it, and will speak against it tonight and whenever we have an opportunity to put to the test and the evidence that we can bring forth to show how dumb this bill is.

1850

All the educators on the other side ought not to express surprise that we New Democrats are opposed to it, because I say to those who are principals or former principals or teachers, they ought to be critical of what's before us today. I liken this bill to what the Conservative government did when they were in government, and I'm speaking to a whole lot of Liberals tonight. I'm only speaking largely to the Liberals in this House who are yapping beside me and to the Liberal supporters who are out there who might be watching this political program. I'm speaking to them.

Interjections.

Mr. Marchese: They yap, they yap, and that's all they yap about. Who knows what they're talking about? I can tell you, it's not about Bill 52.

So as I address those Liberal voters out there who are thinking about education and are thinking about how to distinguish between Tories and Liberals, just take a hard look at what I'm about to say to this bill.

You will recall that the Tories introduced a teacher test. You will remember, Madam Speaker, and I'm not sure—you might have known, in your other life when you weren't here—Kennedy and I used to attack the Conservative government on a regular basis on that teacher test, and why did we do that? We argued differently, of course. Mr. Kennedy had his own language and I had mine, where I said that putting first-year student teachers to the test is nothing but a political move. It has nothing to do with pedagogy; it has a lot to do with politics. Why did they introduce a teacher test for first-year teachers? To make it appear, Norm, like you were going to be tough on teachers and you were going to get the best out of those first-year teachers, no matter what.

What I pointed out to the Liberals who don't know this and to the Tories who don't know it, didn't know it and will never know it, is that 99% of those first-year teachers passed the test, and what does it show? It shows that the first-year test that the Tories introduced was about politics, not pedagogy, meaning nothing to do with how we learn and how you teach, for that matter.

What are the Liberals doing today?

Interjection.

Mr. Marchese: Norm, I just want to help you out. I just want to point out to you that the Liberals are doing what you did. I know you don't like to hear it—this is true—but they're doing exactly what you did.

Hon. Mr. Bradley: No.

Mr. Marchese: Jimmy, you were a former teacher. There's a principal right behind you.

Hon. Mr. Bradley: I'm telling Dave Cooke.

Mr. Marchese: Dave Cooke? I don't know what he said about this bill, but I've got to tell you, all New Democrats, that I'm aware, are opposed to this bill, because it's nothing but politics; nothing to do with how kids or students learn.

So the point of it is—the Liberal point of it, that is—to communicate to parents that we're going to hold students in school and argue, “Who doesn't want that?” Liberals will say, “But who doesn't want students to stay? How could you be opposed to that?” Indeed, how could anybody oppose the idea of students staying in school? But to introduce this bill that will do nothing to hold those students is nothing but politics, and I've got to tell you, when Liberals do it, it's an abhorrence to me.

I understand it with Tories, and I enjoyed beating them up regularly, but when Liberals do it, it is equally abhorrent, and I enjoy attacking them at every turn. I enjoy it, and I love to demystify and exfoliate that Liberal onion. I love to do it, because it's nothing short of politics, and no Liberal will ever stand up and admit this; they can't. But the polling shows that the majority of people want Liberals to introduce good education in our schools so that students will want to stay for as long they can, and not introduce a bill that pretends to hold them, even if, for a variety of reasons, students may not want to.

Hon. Mr. Bradley: Malcolm Buchanan likes it.

Mr. Marchese: I've got to tell you, Mr. Bradley, my good friend for many years in this place, you know how this whole thing works in this place. You know how it works, and you know better. I know you're playing a game with me; I know that. But worse, your government is playing a game with parents. That is what is most hurtful, and that's why I address myself to Liberals tonight, not to New Democrats but to Liberals, and forget those who are Tories. I don't know what they think about this. I'll let the Tories speak to this issue. But those who are Liberals ought to be offended by it.

Hon. Mr. Bradley: Dave Cooke.

Mr. Marchese: Minister, I want to tell you, if you look at your preamble—I'm going to refer you to it at the moment—if you actually did what you say in the preamble, you wouldn't need to force students to stay in school. So it puzzles me that on the one hand you seem to have an understanding of what needs to be done. On the other hand, you simply do not implement what you purport to say, and then you implement a bill that says you're going to force kids to stay in school no matter what, and we're going to punish them for it, and I'll explain that in a little bit.

Here's what you say in the preamble.

Hon. Mr. Bradley: Not to stay in school; to keep learning.

Mr. Marchese: For your information, s'il te plaît, by “preamble” I mean that which appears before we even start discussing or detailing what the bill is all about. The preamble in this bill says the following:

“The people of Ontario and their government:

“Believe that all secondary school pupils deserve a strong education system that provides them with a good outcome and prepares them for a successful future in their destination of choice, whether that is a work placement with training, an apprenticeship, college or university;”—it's a good objective.

“Recognize that the education system must challenge and engage pupils with differing learning styles and make learning more relevant to them;”—it's a perfect statement. It makes so much profound sense, and all those who have been teachers, even Liberal teachers, will agree that it makes such profound sense to “engage pupils with differing learning styles and make learning more relevant to them.” Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing, mon ami Monsieur Bradley, le ministre?

Hon. Mr. Bradley: That's what we're doing.

Mr. Marchese: That's what you're doing, eh? Hmm.

Let me move on to speak about what you're doing at the moment, what you, Minister, are saying you're doing.

“Recognize that the education system must continue to provide broad supports so pupils can succeed and graduate;” Minister Bradley says, “That's what we're doing.”

Moving on: “Understand the education system needs to instil in young people a lasting, positive attitude toward learning that will keep them motivated to stay in school until they graduate or turn 18;” Mr. Bradley confirms that that's what they're doing.

“Believe pupils must have a real choice through equivalent ways of learning that meet the requirements of the Ontario secondary school diploma;” Mr. Bradley, that’s what you’re doing.

“Recognize the importance of providing pupils with academic preparation as well as skills that will prepare them for the workplace;” Minister?

Hon. Mr. Bradley: Of course.

Mr. Tim Peterson (Mississauga South): That’s what we’re doing.

Mr. Marchese: That’s what Mr. Peterson says the Liberals are doing.

“Understand that motivating pupils to stay in school depends on the combined efforts of educators, parents, employers and the wider community;

“Recognize that each student deserves opportunities that build on their interests and that recognize their individual strengths; by building on the creativity and strength of Ontario’s education system and by forging links with the wider community, we can create an environment committed to the success of every student; one that focuses on providing the care and support that each student needs to reach their potential;” Mr. Bradley nods in confirmation of this.

“Affirm that no initiative is more essential to the province’s future than a plan that ensures young people keep learning until they graduate ... whether it is in classroom or through” another learning opportunity.

The reason why I read for the record what it says in the preamble is to argue that if the Liberals were actually doing all these things, students would be willing to stay in school for a long time, and if the board is failing to do that, it means some students will drop out for a variety of reasons. Mr. Levac will have an opportunity, I’m assuming, to speak to this too, to talk about this as an educator. If we in fact did a lot of what we claim we’re doing, then students would be better prepared, best prepared, ready, willing and able and desiring to continue with their education. If we’re not providing that, it means many students will find it difficult to cope in the education system and eventually will want to leave.

1900

So I argue with you and I put to you that you as a government are failing our students. The Conservative government certainly failed us before, and severely, and the Liberal government is doing the same except they put a liberal, human face to it, where they pretend they’re so caring of our education system and our students, but I argue there aren’t too many differences, although it’s hard to tell, between Liberals and Tories in this regard.

This government says, and the minister said in her speech, that the fines for students and parents—

Hon. Sandra Pupatello (Minister of Education, minister responsible for women’s issues): That’s so outrageous.

Mr. Marchese: The minister says that what I said is outrageous. There is no Liberal drama in this place. There are no Liberal actors—or as the Premier would say, thespians—in their ranks. They’re all sincere

Liberals just working hard to represent parents and students. That is all Liberals are, and Minister Pupatello is the most brilliant example of sincerity. I’ve been to many of your press conferences to see the show, and it’s unbelievable.

You will note in this bill that the fines for offences related to non-attendance in school set out in section 30 are raised from \$200 to \$1,000. Madame Pupatello doesn’t state that, did not state that in her remarks and is not likely to state it, should she speak again. No Liberal former trustee or educator will ever say this, but the minister did say that this has existed or has been in place for, oh, good heavens, 50 years, she argues.

Mrs. Liz Sandals (Guelph–Wellington): It has.

Mr. Marchese: But it has. The member from Guelph–Wellington—

Mr. Kevin Daniel Flynn (Oakville): You weren’t paying attention.

Mr. Marchese:—and mon ami on the rump here, Mr. Flynn from Oakville; neither of these two members was paying attention, nor is the minister paying attention when I have said—you can’t play with your BlackBerry because if you’re playing with your BlackBerry, you’re not listening, right?

I say to you that the fines in the past were 200 bucks. Right, member from Guelph–Wellington? You have increased that fine from \$200 to \$1,000. Is that correct? Do you deny it?

Mrs. Sandals: It increased to \$1,000.

Mr. Marchese: The member from Guelph–Wellington admits that they have increased the fines from \$200 to \$1,000. Now, why would you do that? What would compel you to do that? Do you think that if you slap them a little harder with a pecuniary kind of interest, they will stay in school? Mr. Levac believes, as a former principal, yes, if you slap them a little harder, they will stay. Not true, and you know it.

The Liberals have increased the fine as a way of making sure that students will stay in school no matter what because now there is an economic incentive. Should they leave, we’re going to fine them. They don’t talk about what is in the preamble in terms of all the education opportunities they’re providing to keep them in school. They’re simply going to fine them. Minister Pupatello says, “Ah, we’ve always fined them. What’s the difference today versus yesterday?” The difference is 800 bucks. Maybe to the minister 800 bucks is not a big deal. For a fundraising event, I tell you, 800 bucks is a big deal, but I say to you that the increasing of the fine is a silly move, and this bill is nothing short of politics, just as the Tories when they introduced the teacher test. It’s the same thing.

Moving on, school boards are going to have to set up a time—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: What would you do, Rosario? What would you do to improve the system? Give me one good idea.

Mr. Marchese: Madame la ministre, I will engage you as I can. I’ve got a whole list of things to talk about.

Please remind me and interject—Speaker, I have no problem with her interjection. Please let her be, okay? We are a team in this place. We work collaboratively here. I like the interjection. She talks about what we're going to do and what would I do—one suggestion, I'm okay. But I want to get through some aspects of the bill first, all right?

School boards going to have to set up a time-consuming and costly mechanism to monitor compliance and handle appeals. I'm going to look at page 8 of the bill to tell you the enormous amount of time it's going to take for a principal or a designate to monitor non-compliance:

“If a principal or board designate determines that a person is not in compliance with section 21 or is not exempt for the purposes of the Highway Traffic Act, he or she shall give notice of the determination to,

“(a) in the case of a person who is at least 16 years old and has withdrawn from parental control, the person; and

“(b) in all other cases, both the person and his or her parent or guardian.”

I'm telling you that the principal or someone else in the school is going to have to spend an incredible amount of time to monitor who is in compliance and who is not. David, you as a former principal will have to tell me as you get an opportunity for your two minutes—and I'm hoping you haven't spoken so you can speak for 15 or 20; I really am. When you stand up, you tell me, as a school principal, how busy you might have been and how busy principals are now to simply keep pace, and how, with the cuts we have sustained over the years, where secretaries in some schools are not there, where some principals are managing two schools, you could absorb yet another responsibility.

You, Dave, will say, “I can. No problem.” Dave says, “I could do this. Whatever new responsibility the Liberal government gives me, I will manage it. Don't you worry.” Imagine the paperwork. Talk about the special education identification process that teachers had to engage in to identify who was special-needs, and the Liberals attacking the former Tory government for going through such an elaborate process to identify students and how much paperwork that involved and how teachers and principals were so enraged with all the paperwork—at least in beginning, because later on I think they didn't quite mind it. And then you tell me that when you have to pick up yet another responsibility, to monitor compliance and handle the appeals, you as Liberals will say, “It's not a problem. It's simply another task,” as if teachers and principals, as well as secretaries, are not already over-engaged in the day-to-day affairs of the school system.

I don't know whether principals are actually going to be doing this. I'm not even sure whether the government is serious about monitoring this. Maybe that's why they're not so terribly worried about paperwork—principal paperwork—to monitor who is in compliance or who is not. Perhaps that's why some Liberals are not worried about it, because they're probably convinced they're not going to actually monitor this, that this indeed will not happen except for the politics of convincing parents

they're actually doing something to hold students in the school system. But if they're actually going to be doing it, this is an incredible paper burden that they have put on the school and the principal and secretaries and/or their designate to have to do this work.

1910

You don't find Madame Pupatello speaking to this. You don't find the member from Guelph–Wellington speaking to this. You don't find the member from Brant speaking to this. You won't find too many Liberals from the rump even touching this topic because I don't think they know what this bill is all about except the politics of it. That is, we're telling parents we're keeping kids in school, and isn't that what we want? As long as you limit yourself to the superficiality of that politics, you as a Liberal are safe in presenting this bill as a great bill.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Is that the best you can do?

Mr. Marchese: I'm waiting for your other speech. I've already read what you had to say. If that's the best you can do with your speech, I am waiting for more, Madame Pupatello. I tell you, the reasons you have given to defend your bill—

Interjections.

Mr. Marchese: No, let her; it's okay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ted Arnott): That's not the way the place runs. The member for Trinity–Spadina has the floor.

Mr. Marchese: The solution to the problem of dropout rates is in improving the curriculum deficiencies. That's what you've got to do. That's what you've got to invest your energies in doing. The equivalent learning initiative in Bill 52 needs to be more fully articulated and funded to be more effective. I'm going to get to that later on when I talk about that.

Compulsory attendance will not solve the problem. What is required is relevant curriculum. An ineffective tool against youth disengagement is what we say this bill is all about. This bill is an ineffective tool against youth disengagement. How can fining students \$1,000 be an effective or efficient tool to engage students? How can it, and how can Liberals argue that it is? That's why I say to you, it's dumb; dumb politics. Good on the one hand if you've been able to persuade a whole lot of Liberal supporters, but I'm telling you, there are a whole lot of people who are beginning to understand that this is not a very good educational bill that you're presenting.

Legislating certain aspects of education could improve the dropout rate, but legislating attendance will not. So if you legislate certain educational aspects that improve the delivery of what we do as educators, it would help, but to legislate students to stay in school does not, and there is simply no evidence to show that.

This kind of bill produces marginal improvement at best. Studies show that this kind of legislation improved the dropout rate by between only 1.2% and 2%. So the compulsory measures—I will read to you the study that they've done in the US. The findings from current studies in the US stay-in-school legislation show that the beneficial effects of this compulsory approach are small,

especially considering the fact that a strict interpretation of the law would imply that virtually no teenager would be allowed to leave before age 18. Clearly, this is not the case. Essentially, the effect of raising the school leaving age above 16 was, on average, that an individual's length of schooling increased by six to eight weeks, that it decreased the dropout rate by between 1.2 and 2.1 percentage points and increased the number of young adults with at least some college learning by 1.5%.

The point is that such measures only marginally improve the dropout rate. But is it worth it, rather than focusing your energies on what you could do to hold students in school from an academic curriculum point of view, rather than the measures that some of these members—

Interjection.

Mr. Marchese: You're so funny. You Liberals are so funny. Such comic relief from the rump from Oakville. You should hear him. Hopefully, it's on Hansard because the comic relief is very, very interesting.

The point of what you're doing is that the improvements are marginal at best. Compulsory measures are simply illusory. Government knows this, and that's why I've argued that this is equivalent to the Tories introducing the teacher test, because that's what this is and nothing short of that. Using punishments pushes out the very students who need the support most. The system needs positive incentives and supports to keep students in the system. The dropout rates are actually a-failure-of-the-system rates. That's what this is about. Your bill is a revelation and an indication and an admission that your education policies are failing, have failed and/or are failing, and that you need to introduce such a dumb measure to try to persuade people that you're doing something very positive.

Why punish students for your failure—our failure, but yours as a government? Why punish them? The question is, how do we challenge those challenging students? How do we motivate them? How do we support them? What incentives do we have? Is it the fine, from 200 to 800 bucks? Is that your incentive? I'm convinced that Madam Chambers knows that this is not an issue, that that's not an incentive, that that's not the way to motivate them. That's not how you challenge students. I'm convinced that maybe Liberals who are listening understand that this is not the way to do it. If only they could admit it publicly, as opposed to one-to-one discussions they either will have with me and/or will have with some of their friends in private.

The kids are forced out because of weak academic performance. It's a response to student behaviour and/or poor attendance, and schools contribute to the problem by discharging the troublemakers through expulsions and/or suspensions.

Speaking about that, I want to say that Bill 52 contradicts the Safe Schools Act. The Safe Schools Act, introduced by the Conservative Party, the zero-tolerance Safe Schools Act, maintained by the Liberals, throws out thousands and thousands of students in the streets every

day. When the Liberals were in opposition, they attacked the Conservative government. Mr. Bradley did so, too—the Minister of Tourism as well did that—as did I, and strongly. Why? Because it punishes two groups of people. Who are they? Children of colour, racialized communities and students with disabilities. The Human Rights Commissioner said so on two occasions: that if you come from a racialized community, you're forced out of the system more often than not through suspensions and/or expulsions. If you've got a disability of sorts, whatever that may be, you're very likely to be expelled or suspended unfairly. Those who are teachers, trustees, or principals know this and they're keeping silent. The Safe Schools Act throws students out rather than keeping them in. Madame Papatello, if you were really serious, you would reform the Safe Schools Act. In fact, either get rid of that bill or change it so drastically that students would be in school learning instead of being outside and potentially being recruited by gangs.

I say to the minister: What we need—if she's listening in the backroom—is discretion instead of zero tolerance. Before the imposition of the Safe Schools Act, the authority to suspend a student was limited to a principal, and the authority to expel was limited to school boards. In both cases, the exercise of that authority was discretionary—before the Safe Schools Act. What we need, Madam Minister, if you're listening in the backrooms, are mandatory alternatives for all suspended and expelled students. There you are, Madam Papatello. I hope you're listening.

1920

Students who are having trouble at school won't alter their behaviour by sitting at home or roaming the streets. The human rights commissioner recommended a legal requirement that the Minister of Education and school boards set up and fully fund alternative programs for all suspended and expelled students. Also, boards should use in-school suspensions, particularly where the student does not present a threat to the safety of others, in order to ensure that a suspended student is not unsupervised during the day. I offer these two suggestions to the minister in terms of what I would do.

Minister, I offer this third suggestion to you, in the event that you are interested. Let me read it for the record for you: restoring the community adviser, restoring the youth outreach workers who dealt with at-risk students, students who went to the youth outreach workers when they had a problem—academic, emotional or economic. Those workers were fired by the Toronto board because they were broke and they couldn't afford to keep them. Attendance counsellors and social worker positions were cut—social workers who could be so very helpful to students who are in trouble or who are at risk. When the minister says, "What would you do?" I offer those three suggestions to her, because these positions are vanishing throughout or have literally vanished under the Conservative regime and have not been restored under the Liberals.

So, Minister, your Safe Schools Act, instead of providing educational opportunities to students, throws them out to be potential recruits for gangs. Now you introduce Bill 52, that says you've got to stay in school. You've got two contradictory policies and bills that are at work here: one bill that says, "Throw them out"; another, Bill 52, that says, "Keep them in." You see how they don't work with each other, but rather against each other? The minister and the ministry and the Liberal rump, who are too busy here doing other things, cannot put these two together, cannot reasonably understand the connection between one and the other, because if they did, they would oppose the Safe Schools Act and reform it, and oppose Bill 52, that attempts to force students to stay without providing the educational opportunities they so desperately need from JK, SK, grade 1, grade 2, 3, and on and on. That's what you need. We're not doing that.

This government should be providing grade 9 and 10 courses that ought to be redesigned, and grade 11 and 12 workplace preparation courses should be more relevant and realistic to vocational goals. It needs to address what students are feeling and why it is that they're disengaged. You need to deal with these students from JK. That's why New Democrats, in the election of 2003, advocated for having full-time junior kindergarten and full-time senior kindergarten. Why? Because the best prevention for poor educational outcomes is to make sure that they have a good educational beginning. If you build strongly the academic and social foundation in junior kindergarten and senior kindergarten, those students are more likely to do better academically in grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, and if you did that, you would be keeping students in school and keeping them motivated, with a desire to continue beyond age 16 and beyond age 18. But we're not doing that. And so that time, that period of time which is most fundamental to social growth, intellectual growth and emotional growth, is the time when so many students who come from disadvantaged homes are getting the least support.

Instead of admitting that, acknowledging that and doing something about it, we introduce this bill. So I argue that prevention is the best form of educational opportunities that you can provide. It's an important investment to make. Every cent you spend in those early years is money or dollars recovered down the line. Every student who stays in school does not become a social or economic burden to themselves and to society down the line.

This bill purports to do that. You are starting at the wrong place, and it will not succeed. The study I have given you or put to the evidence from the US shows this doesn't work. If you want to prevent students from leaving, invest early. This government is not doing that, but in my view that's what must be done.

There is a provision to exempt students from the application of this bill by the use of an equivalent learning option, but the equivalent learning option programs don't talk about where the money will come from.

I want to quote some of the people who have spoken to this bill on this particular issue.

OSSTF has spoken to this part. One education expert—this is an OISE professor; I'll get to this OISE professor in a second. OSSTF said the following:

"It is the details of these 'equivalent learning' establishments which cause considerable concern for OSSTF members. We note that acceptable learning locations will be further defined in ministry and board policies and guidelines, which are subject to much less scrutiny than regulation"—or legislation, for that matter. "Who will set the standards and requirements for the board policies? Who will approve the providers of equivalent learning and their courses or programs? We are also very concerned that the requirements for achieving secondary school credits will be watered down."

That's what OSSTF said about that particular aspect of the equivalent learning option.

If the government is serious, why is it not doing this? Why is it not in legislation and/or regulation? Why are they not leading on, by way of example, in terms of what an equivalent learning option is? And why are they not paying for it? Why do you shrug it off to boards of education that don't have the money to do this and are already overburdened with so many things and you then impose yet another responsibility on boards of education? Who is going to be providing this equivalent learning option if it's not boards of education? The bill is quite clear on this. It doesn't have to be a board. It can be any institution that could provide an equivalent learning option. It's like a voucher system, as some educator said to me the other day. You can simply go to some learning institution, whatever that is, whoever it is, calling itself a learning institution—

Interjections.

Mr. Marchese: Boys, if you want to play with your BlackBerries, you've got to be quiet.

Interjection: Keep going. You've got the floor.

Mr. Flynn: You're not making any sense.

Mr. Marchese: Speaker, you've got to control these people. You've got to control them. They're playing with their BlackBerries and they're yapping all the time. And then the member for Oakville says I'm not making any sense. How could I make sense to a member who is constantly playing with his BlackBerry and yapping with the member from Mississauga? How can that be?

And the camera has got to focus in on these people playing with their BlackBerries for hours and hours, I'm telling you. They don't pay attention in this place, and that's what worries me about introducing technology in this place. As soon as you do that, all you've got is people starting to play with their BlackBerries and—

Interjection.

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Mr. Marchese: I'm glad you're listening, because you're very into this, but you've got two members right beside me, right here, constantly playing with their BlackBerries. He's proud of it; the member from Oakville is very proud to say, "I'm not paying attention. I don't have to pay attention." I wouldn't mind if they just yapped silently instead of yapping nonsensically out loud

to distract you, Speaker, more than me because, as you know, I'm going on, right?

Mr. Bob Delaney (Mississauga West): Yes, come on, Rosie. Deep breath, deep breath. It's okay.

Mr. Marchese: Such a curious individual.

The equivalent learning option may be offered by the board or it may be offered by another learning institution without any supervision. We don't know who's going to supervise this. There is no sense of who's going to supervise this. Where is the accountability? By the way, where is the standing committee on education that would permit transparency and accountability? Where is that standing committee on education that the Liberal opposition party mentioned in its 2003 election? For the last three years it has barely spoken to the issue of the standing committee on education that they promised so we could get the transparency and accountability that we are looking for. To whom are they accountable? These boards are going to have to offer an equivalent learning option, but we don't have any mechanism to review it, to know what boards are doing. It's simply stated in the bill that such an option exists, and that's the extent of it.

It's like everything else this government speaks about that is simply magical by the mere announcing of a promise, similar to what Madame Papatello announced the other day. I was at Church Street school and I thought, "Today is going to be my lucky day. She's going to announce something very, very important for our teachers, our boards and our students." This is what she said: "We're going to get rid of the 8.3% teacher gap that exists." For those of you fine Liberals watching today, what that means is the following: Teachers are paid a salary, so it doesn't affect the salary of the teacher. But the gap that we speak of, that Dr. Rozanski, who did the study in 2002, spoke of, is what teachers have to be paid but are not receiving from the government, to be able to adequately pay teachers and adequately pay for all of the other educational responsibilities the government has.

Minister Papatello came to Church Street school and said, "The gap is gone. We're just eliminating it." That's all she said. And not only that, what she said is, "We're going to take whatever millions it takes"—and by the way, Dr. Rozanski said at the time that he did his study that it would probably take about \$650 million to deal with that gap. It's a big number. It's a high number. So Minister Papatello, who is here today, said, "We're going to take the money that is in the learning opportunities grant and simply shift that to pay for the gap."

Mr. Levac, member from Brant, another curious thing: I thought, "Hmm, this is interesting. There's no new announcement here that says we're going to get \$200 million, \$300 million, \$400 million, \$500 million to eliminate that gap." It simply says, "We're going to take it from the learning opportunity grant," which has been, by the way, to all you fine Liberal supporters, the program that Minister Kennedy often referred to. Whenever there was a gap to be filled, a problem to be solved, Kennedy would say, "Go to the learning opportunity

grant. That's where you find the money." Whenever any board had a problem: "They've got loads of money. They've got the learning opportunity grant." All of a sudden, mon amie M^{me} Papatello says that that money, whatever boards used it for in the past, will now be used to deal with the teacher gap—8.3%.

For those of you who follow this—I tend to follow this because I'm really very keen and interested—I said to myself, "How are we going to fund all the other programs that have been funded by the learning opportunity grant?" How indeed? Where's the pecunia, i.e., the money? It's not here; it's not there. It will never be announced. The government simply announced that the gap is gone and magically it disappears.

Mr. Delaney: You'll blow a gasket.

Mr. Marchese: No, don't you worry about me, my friend from—

Mr. Delaney: Mississauga West.

Mr. Marchese: —Mississauga West. Don't you worry about me. I worry about Liberal hubris, because so many ministers are at the point of exploding with their hubris. You should worry more about them than me.

So you understand, when Liberals announce these things, they simply make them go away by merely saying, "The problem is gone." But the problem will continue to exist, member from Oakville, whether you like it or not. You can go to your people in Oakville and say, "The minister said that the gap is gone. The problems of our educational system are resolved. Don't you worry." But people like me, who care about education, who've been in this field for a long time, know this is nothing but a political game.

I've got to tell you, when I see political games, it just disturbs me. It's just the way I am. I hate political games. It doesn't matter which party does it. Even if we do them, I hate them. It's true. Even when New Democrats engage in a game from time to time, I just don't like it. But I hate it when I see it in the Liberals, because they pretend, "Oh, Liberals have a heart." It's like we sent the supervisor into Dufferin-Peel. When Liberals send a supervisor, they do it with love, but when Tories sent supervisors into three boards—Ottawa, Toronto and Hamilton—they did it with evil intent. When Liberals get into power, they're such lovey-dovey kinds of creatures that everything they do has to be nice, because they're Liberals. Right? It just never ceases to amaze me.

I put these things out so that those of you who are interested in education will know that the minister will announce all sorts of things, whether they're real or not, and will have you believe that they are, whether you believe it or not—and more so than not. If it's reported in the media that the minister has gotten rid of the teacher gap, it will be believed by people. Why wouldn't they believe it?

Mr. Flynn: Get me in Hansard some more, Rosie.

Mr. Marchese: Member from Oakville, I'm going to get you in Hansard as long as I can, and I do this to provoke you to speak, to provoke you to do your 20 minutes, because you've got time. Dave Levac, you've

got to get this man to speak more often in this place. Get him to speak, because he's got zeal. I can tell. He's got interest. It's there, and I want to hear him more often.

What more does this bill do? Let's see. It says that if students don't stay till the age of 18, they might not be able to get their driver's licence. Here is another punitive measure; not an educational measure, not something that is motivating the students to learn, but saying, "You'd better stay in school," as a father might, or possibly a mother who might say the same thing: "If you don't stay in school, you're not going to get the money for your insurance on that car."

This Liberal government actually believes, I think, that if you say to students "You won't be able to get your car licence," they actually will stay, as if that will magically, like all things Liberal, make students all of a sudden reform themselves and say, "Good heavens, all these years it's been so tough on me, so difficult. I can't read or write very well. I've got a learning disability. I never got the help I needed from the educational system, but, God knows, I want that driver's licence. Now I've got to hunker down, because Papatello says I can't get my licence." You've had educational problems for years and years, and the minister says, "We're going to make you stay no matter what," and by depriving you of your licence, you're going to, all of a sudden, magically start learning better.

You see, it just doesn't work. You can see, good listeners, good citizens all, and taxpayers as well, this is bad policy, terrible politics as I have exposed it, because it does nothing to help students who need the help in our educational system.

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What has another person said, a professor at OISE?

Interjection.

Mr. Marchese: Jim Bradley, good to have you here again.

"One education expert who specializes in systemic change, University of Toronto professor Barrie Brent Bennett, called the proposed legislation problematic. He said the mantra of 'more is better' does not always apply in education.

"I think it's important for kids to get as much education as they can, but more of something that caused them to leave school in the first place isn't the answer," said Mr. Bennett, who teaches at the U of T's Ontario Institute for Studies and Education."

Mr. Bradley, to repeat it for you: "I think it's important for kids to get as much education as they can, but more of something that caused them to leave school in the first place isn't the answer." And I agree with him. Most educated folk that I know will say the same thing. I have to assume there are a whole lot of educated Liberals, both in cabinet and outside of cabinet, who must understand this, and if they don't, I have to worry about your intellectual capacity to grasp this issue.

Hon. Mr. Bradley: What does Dave Cooke say?

Mr. Marchese: Well, I worry. I hope you don't mind me worrying about some of you in this regard.

Mr. Delaney: But Rosie, your hair will fall out if you worry.

Mr. Marchese: It already has fallen out, thank you so much.

Mr. Delaney: See? Proves the point.

Mr. Marchese: And it's more genetics than worry, I have to tell you. Worry doesn't, generally speaking, cause the loss of hair, except if it's extreme, and only on some people.

Here's what another young person said: "While the work the education ministry has done to keep students engaged and interested in high school is commendable,"—it says something positive about you—"this step"—meaning, this bill—"is an unnecessary infringement upon the lives of Ontario adolescents. If you have to enforce staying in school with such punitive measures, then there is still something wrong with the system," which is what I've been saying. We tend to think the same way, right?

Maybe there's something wrong with our thinking. Maybe it's a mindset on our part. The people I'm quoting, I don't know what political position they have, but I suspect they're not NDP. I suspect they're much closer to you politically than me, but we tend to think the same way.

"The government should find better ways to encourage students instead of scaring them into their own education."

Hon. Mr. Bradley: Who are you quoting?

Mr. Marchese: It's a young student whose name is Nathan Lachowsky. He's the president of the executive council of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association. He wrote this and he was quoted in the *Globe and Mail*, for your benefit, Jim.

Hon. Mr. Bradley: Thank you.

Mr. Marchese: You're welcome.

I think he says something else here: "Gerard Kennedy, Ontario's Minister of Education, proposed last week that the province revoke the driver's licences of students who drop out of high school before 18. The 'Learning to 18' initiative would also force 16- and 17-year-olds to prove they are still in school before being allowed to get a driver's licence." He said that as well.

I point out to you, by the way, that if some of these students should decide to drive without a driver's licence, you are creating a new class of uninsured drivers. You would be creating a new uninsured driver by this bill and would be exposing parents to a new and increased liability. It is highly probable that most of you did not think about that, but I believe this is going to be an unintended consequence of the harm you are doing through this particular bill.

I tell you, this is a simplistic solution to a complex problem, and I think you will have to think this through as you go along. I am hoping that the government, if it's going to do this, is going to find a generous commitment—of funds, that is—to provide for those equivalent programs and offer detailed information about what the expectations will be regarding these programs. Those of

you who have watched tonight or continue to watch tonight as we debate this bill, I urge you to make your voices heard. I urge you to come to the committee hearings that we're going to have on this bill. We don't know when we're going to do this or when the Liberals have an interest in doing this. It could be the summer months, possibly August. My suspicion, hopefully, is that it might be in September, but we'll see. The point of September is to engage more of you who might be here at that time, as opposed to being on holiday in July and August. So I'm urging the government to hold these hearings in September.

And I am urging those of you who are interested in this bill to lobby your member of provincial Parliament face to face, like the member from Oakville, who has been so thoroughly engaged, and like the member from Mississauga West, who is a strong advocate of the computer tablets in this place and the BlackBerries in particular that we are seeing more and more frequently. I used to believe that I didn't mind them, but now as I see them on a regular basis, beside me, in front of me, I'm beginning to be alarmed by them. It makes me feel that the majority of them are not paying attention because they don't want to, and they should be. So please call the members of provincial Parliament, meet them face to face and ask them to give you a rationale as to why they support this bill. But my hope is that you will be opposing this bill, as New Democrats have tonight and as we will continue to do throughout the hearings. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Questions and comments?

Mrs. Sandals: I just want to comment briefly on the comments from the member for Trinity–Spadina. Let's talk about the fines for truancy, the issue that the member brought up. I was a school trustee for 15 years, and I don't think in that entire 15 years we ever charged a child with truancy with the intent of imposing a fine. In fact, it has always been to get a court order that they attend school. The only time, in my experience, that we have used that long-existing clause that says you can be charged with truancy—and one of the penalties is a fine—has been in relation to parents. You will sometimes find, particularly with 13-year-olds, 14-year-olds, that the problem with the truant child is, quite frankly, that the parent isn't paying attention, and the fine is more a mechanism to get the attention of the parent. Hence the rationale for updating it to today's monetary value, because I don't think this fine has been updated, certainly not the whole time I was a trustee. So we're simply updating it to a modern, meaningful value, not because we're going to fine kids if they don't go to school but because of the experience that says sometimes you need to get the attention of the parent, to get the parent on file and paying attention.

The main thrust of the bill from my point of view is giving the government the ability to introduce new forms of curriculum, because the member from Trinity–Spadina is right: What we need to do is have a more relevant curriculum for those students who are dropping out, because quite frankly they don't fit the current curricu-

lum as defined by the previous government. So what we are doing with this legislation is getting the ability to set up more streams of alternative learning, co-op placement, workplace engagement for students, to set up new diploma streams which have high skills as the goal. That's the main thrust. Thank you.

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Mr. Norm Miller (Parry Sound–Muskoka): It's my pleasure to add some comments to the hour-long leadoff speech of the member from Trinity–Spadina. I'm not sure whether I can be quite as colourful as the member from Trinity–Spadina, but I'll make a good attempt.

At the very beginning of his hour-long speech, he was talking about teacher testing. I think he was saying it was a bad thing that the Conservatives did. Well, I just want to point out to him that that and many of the other initiatives that were brought in by the Harris Conservatives came from the Royal Commission on Learning that was—

Hon. Mr. Bradley: Dave Cooke.

Mr. Miller: Dave Cooke—put into effect in the NDP years and implemented in the Conservative years. Unfortunately, the current Liberal government is undoing all that good work that was done.

I might point out that Bill 78, the bill the government passed just last week—despite the fact that Dave Cooke, the NDP Minister of Education; Bette Stephenson, the Conservative Minister of Education; and Sean Conway, the Liberal Minister of Education, when they were on the TVOntario program, all said that giving control of the college of teachers to the teachers' unions is a bad idea that's not going to help the kids at all. Despite that, this government still passed Bill 78 last week, and also despite the fact that in my riding, Parry Sound–Muskoka, the former member from Muskoka, Ken Black, former principal and former teacher, wrote last week in the local paper about what a bad idea it is to give control of the college of teachers to the teachers' unions. There are a lot of well-known Liberals involved in the education system all telling you it's a bad idea, but you ignore them anyway and go ahead and pass the bill.

Now, I will, in my 11 seconds left, agree with the member from Trinity–Spadina: This bill is about politics. It's punitive, it's impractical and unenforceable, so I do agree with the member from Trinity–Spadina on that.

Mr. Gilles Bisson (Timmins–James Bay): I know what bill we're on, Mr. Government House Leader, because I was in my office returning phone calls to constituents, as we all were, and I was listening to Mr. Rosario Marchese give his presentation on this bill as our critic on behalf of New Democrats, and I've got to say I agree with him wholeheartedly. Let me tell you a couple of reasons why.

I had a wonderful opportunity, as we all do as members, to go and speak to high schools this spring. We're getting to that time of year. We're in the curriculum in the fall and spring, depending on the rotation. Grade 5 and high school students go through the whole issue of civics class. I was in Smooth Rock Falls at the

English high school, I guess about a week or two ago, and we had an assembly where we talked about this very issue.

People asked me, the students asked me—this is really uncanny—“Mr. Bisson, we heard something a while back that the government says if I drop out of high school, I could lose or not get my driver’s licence.”

I said, “Don’t worry. Even the Liberals aren’t stupid enough to do this.” I said, “This is something that they floated. It was a trial balloon and it didn’t go anywhere. Mr. Kennedy being gone, having left and running on the federal political side, this thing is going to die, because Sandra Pupatello, the Minister of Education, who I know as an individual, a very good person—I get along with her quite well—an astute politician, wouldn’t do something so silly.”

What happened, Sandra? You’re a lot smarter than that. I can’t believe for two seconds that my friend Sandra Pupatello, who I have so much respect for, would say that the way to keep kids in school is to penalize them by taking away their driver’s licence.

I’m going to get into all of the reasons why I think that, Sandra, you’re wrong—pardon me; the Minister of Education; I stand corrected—and why it is that I think we should be coming at this from another perspective. Yes, we’ve got to keep kids in schools, but there are other ways of doing it that I think are quite a bit more effective. Trying to withdraw licences, I think, is absolutely, as the kids in Smooth Rock Falls said, stupid.

The Acting Speaker: I will remind all members of the House that it’s inappropriate to use members’ personal names. I would prefer that they use their riding names or their ministry names.

Mr. Flynn: It certainly is a pleasure to join this debate, and it certainly is a pleasure to follow the member from Trinity–Spadina and hear his opinions on technology and BlackBerries and how they should be used.

Mr. Bisson: Where’s my BlackBerry? There we go.

Mr. Flynn: A little old-fashioned there. Maybe he can talk to his neighbour about his BlackBerry. Phone Rosie.

Anyway, I think you have to think back to when we were elected: 2003. Think of the state of the public education system in this province. Think of the lack of confidence that previous governments had instilled in public education and look at the progress that has been made to this date. You may find some details with that that you don’t like. You may see some things you may prefer to have done. But you look at what we’ve done in almost three short years compared to what destruction was wrought upon the public education system during the past 12 to 15 years. In my own fairly affluent community: sharing textbooks. One kid would get the textbook between 4 o’clock and 6 o’clock, the parents would drive over, pick it up at 6:30, and another kid would use it for the rest of the evening in Mike Harris’s Ontario—something to be very, very proud of.

Mr. John Yakabuski (Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke): That’s crap.

Mr. Flynn: You’re right. I think John Yakabuski is right. He said, “That’s crap,” and I agree with the member. I’m glad he shares the same feelings about the Mike Harris government that I do. The school leaving age has not been changed or reviewed in this province for 50 years. We’re suggesting that it be done. We’re suggesting that we also attach some consequences to that. We’re also attempting to encourage our young people to stay in school longer because we know, quite simply, that a better education leads to better jobs. Better jobs lead to better incomes, to a better life for your family. If you somehow want to hold the kids back in Ontario, maintain the status quo. If you want to do something good, support this legislation.

The Acting Speaker: The member for Trinity–Spadina has two minutes to reply.

Mr. Marchese: I’d like to thank all the members, and particularly want to focus on two, the Liberal ones. The member from Oakville, very typical of what Liberals do—whenever they can’t deal with a bill or the particular problem they’re being asked about, they simply go back to some other previous government. They do this systematically and it’s tiring. The member from Oakville says, “Think of where the educational system was.” I thought we were debating Bill 52. If we’re debating Bill 52, you’ve got to make arguments to defend your bill. So the member from Oakville says we need to encourage students to stay. No; Bill 52 says that they will be forced to stay.

Interjections.

Mr. Marchese: It’s not an encouragement. John, if you don’t mind, it’s not an encouragement. This bill forces them to stay in school. It’s obligatory. The member from Guelph–Wellington says that we’re going to fine students to get the attention of parents. What a rationale. This is why you Liberals worry me. Why don’t you get the attention of parents in junior kindergarten, senior kindergarten and grades 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8? That’s where you get the attention of the parents, not at age 16, when you fine them with a \$1,000 fine instead of the old \$200 fine, and you’re going to take away their licence. Sorry. Truancy should be regarded as an educational problem through educational programs, not through retribution, shaming, denunciations, fining, and pulling the licence away. This is not an effective academic way of reaching those students. This bill is politically wrong. It’s not smart to hurt students like this. You need to rethink it. I hope the parents will oppose it, as New Democrats do.

The Acting Speaker: Further debate?

Mr. Phil McNeely (Ottawa–Orléans): I’m just wondering, Speaker, what has been in the schools lately, because I’ve visited probably 10 or 12 schools over the last two months. I found them to be exciting places, whether they be primary schools or secondary schools: exciting places of learning, happy places, filled with teachers with good ideas. Certainly, our education system has been moving forward a lot.

One of the things I want to discuss tonight that I think is extremely important is the level of acceptance of technical training in high schools. I think that has been at a level that's not acceptable, a stigma towards technical learning in favour of academic learning. I was at a meeting of the tradespeople in my own riding about a year ago. A young fellow I knew, Dan Vinette, was in the audience. Dan Vinette is an elevator expert and has been working in that trade probably 15 or 20 years. This was new for me. I was talking to the trades and I mentioned that the people who can't make it along the academic lines should have that opportunity of learning the technical courses and such.

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So I was sitting down after having said those words and Dan Vinette got up and said, "Mr. McNeely, I think I'll have to correct something here. I had the opportunity of following academic or following technical when I went to high school, and I chose technical and I'm very, very pleased I did. I've made a very good living at being an expert in elevators. It's a trade that I've enjoyed. It's a trade that I teach in now, and I would just like to correct it. I could have gone in the academic line, and I chose not to. I chose a technical field."

I think we have to rework the whole technical training, and I think we're in the position now that we've had schools much the same for many years. Fifty years ago, when the age of 16 was introduced as the age required before you left school, I was teaching in a one-room schoolhouse up in Renfrew county. That's a long time ago, and to have not changed that 16—I'm sure that if we compare the societies we go out into today, if we look at the complexity of jobs, we have to say that things are much different in the last 50 years. So I really am pleased to see that age 18 is being put into legislation, that, unless you've graduated from high school, you have to stay in school and continue your learning.

One of the things we have to do is make sure that we give equal credit to technical training. That's something easy to do. In my own riding of Ottawa-Orléans, we don't have any post-secondary education. The nearest is Algonquin, which is right across the city. It's approximately an hour's ride by bus, and it's difficult for the students from our area. We're in discussions now with Algonquin College and we're in discussions with la cité collégiale to deliver virtual post-secondary education in Orléans and, at the same time, to get into high schools with this virtual education. The colleges are linked with all these schools. Time delays are not apparent with the voice. We've had trials, the cameras are set up, and students out in Orléans will be able to converse with professors at Algonquin or at la cité collégiale. I'm sure that for la cité collégiale it will be even better because their client base is across this province and they'll be able to deliver their programs across the province.

So these are the ideas that are going to come out of this. We all acknowledge that we do not run jails in our high schools. Before this legislation is put in place, we're

going to have to have those more interesting educational opportunities for kids.

I'd just like to read: "Students will be much more able to see how the courses they choose are relevant to their future education, training and, ultimately, career. Formal co-operation will be instituted between schools and post-secondary institutions, programs, workplaces and community organizations."

I think that is extremely important, because the technology is there now. The ability to deliver these courses at the high school level is there. The youth in the high schools will be able to get very interesting education through these connections with colleges.

This proposal is coming into the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, and I hope it is one of the areas where we can really make education more meaningful, more interesting and more available to high school kids because if you're not in that academic line and you're not going on to university or college—our industries need all that training now.

I was up in that great riding of Brampton the other day. We went through the Mercedes-Benz or—

Mr. Flynn: DaimlerChrysler.

Mr. McNeely: DaimlerChrysler. To see a \$30,000 car coming out of that plant every minute, to think that they produce 1,500 cars a day in that plant—I think those are the numbers—to see all the technical training, all the instrumentation, the robots, everything like that: We have to get our youth trained for those jobs. To train them for those jobs, we have to make sure they stay in high school. If they don't stay in high school till they get that diploma or get the education for a job, we know then the rates of unemployment, and not being able to compete in this very complex world. That's what happens if they don't get that training.

If you look across this great province, with all the industries we have, everyone is going to occupy a home. Most people will own a home; they'll own a car. And to think that we don't provide that kind of training in our high schools when it could be provided, on a basis that is very low-cost, then we have to see that this is a step forward. The teachers in the system, the industries, the kids themselves, will see the opportunities and be able to take us many steps forward in providing a better education across this province and making us more competitive in this industrial world we live in.

Sixteen years old was a time to leave high school 50 years ago, when life was not very complex. To look at it today and say we have problems with 18 being the age—I've been in the schools and the kids have asked me, "What about this, losing my driver's licence or not being able to upgrade my driver's licence if I leave school?" They understand the importance of the driver's licence. They understand the importance that we're putting on education. The message has got out to the schools. I'm sure it's going to be a workable situation. We will have kids who will consider the ramifications of the driver's licence. It will bring home to them, I think, the importance of staying in school, getting an education; not

being in an education system that is not suited to them, but in an education system that will give them those opportunities to move forward, to be able to sample amongst the different technical training that's available and to choose the right path for them.

It's extremely important that we're opening up the education system, that we're going to have the skills training, that we're going to have the colleges, in association with the high schools, working on curriculum. We'll be able to deliver that through a virtual post-secondary education. They'll be able to get credits from high school. They'll be able to get credits in colleges. It's extremely important. It's the future.

This legislation may have problems and it may have problems in implementation, but it will make people think, it will make people change, and make us deliver the type of education our kids want.

I am very pleased to support this legislation. There will be problems with implementation, as there are with every change, but change must come. We can't stay in the old system; we have to be in the new. We have to have subject matter, content, that's interesting to these kids. They will stay in school if we provide that. Until we provide that, we can't go forward.

We're doing that in Ottawa—Orléans. I think we're going to get our post-secondary education, which can then be used for continuing education. If we have any adults who want to continue skills training from Orléans, they have to make that trip across the city every night and it's not very interesting for them. When we get the virtual education going in the high schools, that will be available for continuing education, and we'll certainly deliver the improvements in education that we need in this province.

I'm very pleased with this legislation. It's the right direction to go in. It's opening things up and it will make a big change to our youth in the future.

The Acting Speaker: Questions and comments?

Mr. Bisson: I have great respect for Mr. McNeely, from the riding of Orléans?

Mr. McNeely: Ottawa—Orléans.

Mr. Bisson: Ottawa—Orléans. I am sorry; riding names have always escaped me. It's one of my things around here.

I have to say, however, I really disagree with the concept.

Interjection.

Mr. Bisson: I don't know. Why is it everybody knows where I'm from? That's a good question. It must be something that we're doing in Timmins—James Bay that makes us stand out. I don't know. Probably the water. No, it can't be the water—well, maybe it is the water. Anyway, that's a whole other issue.

There's nobody in this House—Liberal, New Democrat or Conservative—who says, "As legislators, we don't have to try to figure out ways to keep kids in school." Let's all agree that's where we're going. That's what we all want to do. But it's the method by which we get there. It seems to me that saying to a youngster who is 16 or 17 years old and is thinking of dropping out of

high school because of whatever is going on in their lives—I speak with some experience. I dropped out of high school before I was 18 years old. I joined the armed forces. I went to serve my country. I was 17 years old. As a matter of fact, I quit just shy of my 17th birthday so that I could be in Montreal, ready to muster up as soon as the opportunity came. What do you say to a young person like me at the time who decided to serve his country? That somehow or other, because I decided to serve with Canadian Armed Forces, I couldn't get a driver's licence? That's ridiculous.

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People have things going on in their lives between 16 and 18 that may prevent them from finishing high school. What do you do about a youngster who's suffering abuse? Maybe there's something going on in their lives so that they're not able to be in school, because of either physical or sexual abuse going on at home. There may be a whole host of reasons that the person is not able to deal with being in school at the time. It seems to me that to say the answer is to withdraw the driver's licence leaves a whole bunch of people out of the equation.

I'll get a chance to speak to that a little bit more when I have my chance during this debate.

Mr. Yakubuski: I'm pleased to speak to this bill, Bill 52, the Education Statute Law Amendment Act. I'm very concerned about some of the provisions in this bill. Do we need to encourage our young people to stay in school? That's a no-brainer. Absolutely. Do you encourage them to stay in school by taking away drivers' licences, stooping to those kinds of draconian measures to force people to stay in school? Absolutely not.

There should be only one reason a person loses their driver's licence, and that is because they have been found to be unsuited or incapable of maintaining a safe driving record, following the rules of the road and being able to pass the test. It should be based on one's ability to drive, not an academic credential or some form of social engineering that the McGuinty Liberals have conjured up, that somehow this is the way they're going to make Ontario a better place.

Right from the start, this has been one of Gerard Kennedy's little games. He drops this bill and then he flits off to Ottawa, abandons his riding for months first, and then, finally, under pressure from the opposition, is forced to resign. Quite frankly, I think he would have liked to stall this whole thing in the hope that he could run in the by-election; because the Premier would have held it after December 1, I'm sure, if Gerard had asked, if he had waited a little time to resign. So the whole thing was engineered, and now we're into more engineering on the part of the McGuinty Liberals.

It's quite shameful that you would say to a 17-year-old, "Do you know what? You're not getting a driver's licence." And that could mean that you won't get a job. Maybe you need that job to help out the family. There could be a number of different things. This is social engineering of the lowest form.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Perth–Middlesex): I want to speak directly to the parents watching tonight. It's very simple: We are not giving up on your child, period.

In this province, if you are about 15 years old—15 and a quarter—you can be truant from school, and by the time the system catches up with you, you're 16, and by the time you're 16, you can say to everybody in this society, "I have a right to spend my time hanging out at the mall; I don't have to be in school. I can do what I want. I'm 16 years old. I'm grown up." I'm a parent, and I say to all the parents that we are not giving up on our children, we're not giving up on your child, because 15 and a quarter is way too early in someone's life to say that they have the God-given right to hang out in a mall.

I say to the member from Timmins–James Bay, this bill does not affect you if you decide to serve your country in military service. It has nothing to do with it. If you are working, that is fine. If you are training, that is fine. But if you're hanging out at the mall, that's not fine; it's not fine by those of us in this society who refuse to give up on you, because you're valuable. Your child is valuable to this province. We cannot have tens of thousands of students deciding to drop out every year.

When I talk to high school students and I ask them, "Is this bill reasonable?" they say yes. They said to me, and they said to the Premier when he was at Stratford Northwestern Secondary School, that they agreed with this. When I asked teachers initially, their concern was that our government would not provide sufficient resources for them to provide the programs to save these kids, to help them reach their potential. Now they tell me to a person that because of the investments that Minister Papatello is making and that her predecessor has made, there are the resources there. There are those specialist teachers. We are not giving up on your children. I say to the parents, remember who votes against this bill, who's decided to give up on your child, because we will not.

Mr. Robert W. Runciman (Leeds–Grenville): I appreciate the opportunity to have a few brief comments on Mr. McNeely's contribution this evening. I want to reiterate what my friend from Barry's Bay said with respect to taking drivers' licences away from young people who are not attending school. To reiterate what he said, certainly all of us, as members of this assembly, want to do whatever we can to encourage young people to get the best education possible. There's no question about that. But to penalize people in this manner is unfortunate. I think it sends out all the wrong messages, especially—and I've referenced this in other issues that we've dealt with as a Legislature in the past year or so—in rural Ontario.

What is this going to mean to rural Ontario? That's where we are hearing—the member from Barry's Bay and I tend to represent largely rural ridings—significant concerns about the impact that this could have on the ability of young people who may be faced with all sorts of reasons that they have to support the family: a death in the family, a lost job, whatever it might be. We know in eastern Ontario, especially with the significant loss of

manufacturing jobs, where so many families are under severe economic pressures, that a young person in the family may have to leave school to provide sufficient support so that that family can pay the mortgage payments, pay the taxes, whatever it might be.

That's the sort of thing that's not being recognized by this government. They have a track record of turning the other cheek, not paying sufficient attention to rural Ontario. I predict that they will pay the price at the polls in the next election.

The Acting Speaker: That concludes the time for questions and comments. I'll return to the member for Ottawa–Orléans.

Mr. McNeely: I wish to thank the members for Timmins–James Bay, Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke, Perth–Middlesex, and Leeds–Grenville for their comments.

One of the things I think about is the new technology that's going to be available in high school through our skills training, in colleges, all that new teaching that is not there now. You look at schools like Cairine Wilson in Ottawa–Orléans. Cairine Wilson is missing an automotive shop. They need \$80,000 to complete an automotive shop. They can't get those dollars. It's a program they started last year, and they're supposed to get it this year. That's so important to those students. I think they had 80 people sign up for that program. So that's where we're going. We know that there's a lot more to this world than was in the education system when we came here. These changes are going to be just excellent.

With the virtual education, I'd like to disagree with the member from Leeds–Grenville. The virtual education that I see as being available will be great for rural areas. It will be great to deliver these programs in the small villages and towns across Ontario. That technology is already here. It's moving fast forward. It's part of the student success story, part three that this government has under way.

So it's great to see that we're getting closer to providing the education we need to get those kids who have been falling by the wayside back on the right track. That's where this government is going. That's what these investments are going towards, and we're not far from achieving the results we need. This is a great thing. We can look at some of the downsides of doing it. Needs change, and I think we're going to find that the teachers in our high schools are going to be able to accept that change and contribute to that change, and we'll get that connection with our colleges.

The Acting Speaker: Further debate?

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Ms. Lisa MacLeod (Nepean–Carleton): I wonder if the member from Ottawa–Orléans is actually speaking tonight about his rural area in Ottawa–Orléans and what this bill will actually mean to the residents of his rural community, especially those young kids who are working on the farm, for whom the Minister of Agriculture doesn't even think we need to stand up.

I'm pleased to be joining this debate today on behalf of the Progressive Conservative Party. Our critic for the Progressive Conservative Party—

Hon. Leona Dombrowsky (Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs): My kids were all in school until they were 18.

Ms. MacLeod: That's great. That's wonderful.

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker: Would the member please take her seat. I apologize for interrupting, but I would ask all members of the House to please come to order so that the member for Nepean–Carleton can make her presentation uninterrupted.

The member for Nepean–Carleton.

Ms. MacLeod: In any event, this bill should be re-named the “social engineering act,” because of the Liberals’ belief that they can teach responsibility by punishing kids and taking away their choices, like they are in rural Ontario.

Based on the principle that this legislation is punitive, impractical, unenforceable, and may well be found to be discriminatory under the age provisions of the charter—a Charter of Rights and Freedoms that this Liberal government and previous Liberal governments across this country wrap themselves around every time they need to make a point—I will not be supporting this bill as it presently stands. It's probably an unconstitutional bill, and I think that we ought to see that.

Specifically, I'm going to speak of the ill-conceived provision that allows for a court “to be empowered to order the suspension of a driver's licence of a person who is convicted of being habitually absent from school. The person's licence would be reinstated no later than the date on which the person is no longer required to attend school under section 21 of the act. If, subsequent to his or her conviction, a person is attending school in compliance with section 21 or is exempt for the purposes of the Highway Traffic Act, he or she may request confirmation from a board of that fact for the purpose of having his or her licence reinstated.”

The irony of this, of course, is that a 16-year-old is recognized by this province as being beyond parental control, yet this legislation actually turns the province into a nanny state. I take issue with this. We are now convicting kids for truancy. So, too, do many other Ontarians. Take for example—

Interjections.

Ms. MacLeod: This is what I love about the Liberals. When you say something that they don't want to hear, they try to talk over you, including ministers of the crown. The discipline—I'm amazed, Mr. Speaker.

Take, for example, Barry Lillie, a retired teacher—

Interjections

Mr. Yakabuski: Speaker, I cannot hear the member for Nepean–Carleton.

The Acting Speaker: I ask the Minister of Labour to come to order. I ask the Minister of Agriculture and Food to come to order. I ask the member for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke to come to order.

I return to the member for Nepean–Carleton.

Ms. MacLeod: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I'd like to read an example from Barry Lillie, a retired teacher who wrote in the Record, Kitchener-Waterloo, explaining his problem with the bill and the many complications that could stem from the particular clause I've just mentioned.

“The McGuinty government clearly believes it is their responsibility to make us see the wisdom of their view of Ontario. Some might call it social engineering, but the Liberals would call it common sense (sorry, I couldn't resist).” It might be a revolution. “Now, in all seriousness (maybe not), let's scrutinize the licence loss proposal. It's a serious problem for our students. I always like to look at the workability and potential impact of a policy.

“This government likes tribunals (new adoption law) and advisory boards. This would likely be required in the case of a dropout claiming hardship, who needed his licence perhaps to drive his sick mother to hospital. Now, of course, you would need an appeal board to challenge/review the decision of the earlier tribunal. Each commissioner on each board would require a daily stipend, expenses and an honorarium at the end of their term. Before anyone is appointed, there would need to be a proper examination of the candidates.

“What are the complications besides hardship?” he says. “If a dropout had his or her licence and then quit school, the appropriate bounty officer would be needed to track down those delinquents. If a dropout is truant for X number of days (X is the unknown, Y is the question), you may or may not be declared a dropout. If you are sitting idly at a desk or, as my history teacher often described me, ‘like a bump on the log,’ then perhaps every school will need to have its own ‘bump on the log review committee’ to determine the status of this student's driver licence. There are those students who always know how to beat the system; they don't want a licence. Oh well, we still have that incarceration thing.”

So I guess maybe what I should ask next is not only are we going to send out bounty officers to find out if kids aren't going to school, what about the kids who aren't paying attention in school? What are we going to do to them? No answers. They're actually quiet, because they can't respond.

Or take Kate Heartfield, an Ottawa Citizen columnist. She says: “However well-intended, the driver's licence rule shows disrespect for young people.”

Hon. Mr. Bradley: Is this Randall Denley?

Ms. MacLeod: No. It is Kate Heartfield. I'll send you the article.

“It will delay their maturity; you don't teach responsibility by taking away all the choices. It will be a hardship for those young people who are worst equipped to deal with it.” She continues: “So anyone who doesn't want to take their ‘learning as far as possible’ shouldn't be allowed to drive? By that logic, the province should remove licences from smart high school students who choose not to go to university, or from adults who stubbornly refuse to learn how online banking works.”

What's next: If you don't go to university, this crowd is going to take away your right to vote?

Now, to underscore how ridiculous and gimmicky this provision really is, Linwood Barclay, who is actually the husband of a teacher, writes in the *Toronto Star*: "The provincial Liberals seem to have equated driving a car with making out. It's something fun," like teachers do. He reminds us, however, this is not the case. Rather, he says, "But learning to drive is more than that. It's a basic life skill." This is true on so many levels.

In rural ridings, having a licence is a necessity. My riding of Nepean–Carleton is very large. It is very vast. If a kid in my community from Kars or Burritts Rapids, Munster Hamlet or Manotick was convicted of this Liberal truancy offence, he or she would literally not be able to go to work, would literally not be able to drive a sick parent, a sick relative or an ill neighbour to the Queensway Carleton Hospital. I guess that's what they think is okay.

Additionally, this punitive clause adversely affects those kids who are most vulnerable, who either live in poverty or who are suffering from other troubles like depression or addiction. I want to know from the minister or from the parliamentary secretary: What about a child who goes through a teen pregnancy and takes some time off school? What are they going to do there with her driver's licence? I find it galling that this government would compartmentalize these kids and make them stick to Dalton McGuinty's timetable and not their own.

Because of these concerns, I think that this bill must receive a major overhaul. This is a borrowed and bad idea, with mixed reviews, at best, from the United States. I think the government should back away from this section of the legislation. The legislation, as it currently stands, ignores reality. It ignores the effects it will have on rural and northern Ontario, where alternative forms of transportation are limited and the ability of young family members to drive is integral to daily life. It ignores the financial implications for students who depend on their ability to keep their employment. It ignores teenagers who drop out of school, usually the most alienated and most troubled kids. It ignores the fact there are many personal and unique circumstances in students' lives that may require a temporary or longer-term alternative to the traditional school environment.

Rather than misallocating resources to a truancy tribunal, perhaps the government could find the resources necessary to support our autistic kids that they've broken promises to. These kids want to learn. Some kids don't. These kids want to, and you broke a promise to them. They deserve to have the network and support in place. Those parents who want to have that opportunity are throughout Ontario. Just ask them.

So I think this bill needs to be amended, I think we need to stop turning our back on the autistic children throughout Ontario and meet their needs, and I think—

Hon. Mary Anne V. Chambers (Minister of Children and Youth Services): It's your government that turns its back on autistic kids.

Ms. MacLeod: Okay. That's very—I'm just shocked she would even say that, after challenging a court order that orders this government to supply education services to these children. I'm actually not even in a government, never was. I'm in opposition and was sent here because they continue to break promises—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker: I would ask the House to please come to order. I'll return to the member for Nepean–Carleton.

Ms. MacLeod: This is something that Frank Klees brought up when he spoke to this bill the other day: the continued broken promises to the autistic children across Ontario, a 2003 election promise that this government probably didn't intend to keep, never intended to keep, and just decided to break.

2030

The one great piece of advice that John Baird gave me when I took this seat over was, "You know what? Whenever they decide to raise their voices on the other side, you can look at them straight in the face and say, 'I've never lied to an autistic child,' and they have to hang their head." That's what he told me. The current President of the Treasury Board actually said that. I appreciate—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker: I can't hear the member for Nepean–Carleton.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: The rest of us can. Don't worry.

The Acting Speaker: I would ask the Minister of Education to please come to order.

The member from Nepean–Carleton.

Ms. MacLeod: I think I'll finish my speech today by reading something into the record from a man named Mr. Dickson from Kingston and the Islands:

"For the record, I am a 57-year-old professional engineer. Neither I nor ... my family members will be affected personally by this legislation. I certainly agree that it is laudable to encourage young people to remain in school to at least the age of 18." We're all in agreement.

"However, there is no reason why someone who has dropped out of school may not acquire the skills and behaviour to pass a ... test and keep a driver's licence. Yes, a driver's licence is a privilege, but it is not a privilege that a government should ... deny any of its citizens as a means of social engineering, and that is what this legislation would do. Acquisition of a driver's licence should depend only on being able to acquire and demonstrate the skills and behaviour needed to operate a motor vehicle safely—nothing more. Legislation such as this increasingly restricts personal freedoms for purposes that are not necessarily in the interests of those it affects.

"I would expect a government that is successful in implementing such legislation to move on from this to other social engineering legislation, increasingly restrictive and even sinister. I hesitate to suggest examples."

We've heard a lot of comments from people across Ontario who are very concerned with this section in the legislation, and I would encourage, since the minister is

here tonight, that perhaps she should consider during committee that this actually be amended or removed.

Thank you very much for the opportunity. I thank the members opposite for turning up their Whisper 2000.

The Acting Speaker: Questions and comments?

Mr. Bisson: I want to respond to—

Mr. Dave Levac (Brant): Show us your BlackBerry.

Mr. Bisson: My BlackBerry? “Fly and be free.”

I want to respond to my—you don’t have to look at your BlackBerry. I’ll tell you directly.

I want to say to my good friend from Nepean–Carleton, I enjoyed what she had to say. Nova Scotia, by the way, is a Conservative minority government: 23 Conservatives, 20 New Democrats, eight or nine Liberals. It’s a wonderful direction. That’s where it’s going: NDP up, everybody else down. Anyway, that’s another story.

The point that I wanted to make is that you raised a point that a lot of people outside of urban centres may not realize, and that’s the importance of the driver’s licence to the family overall. For example, in my family neither my wife nor my sisters-in-law actually have driver licences. My daughter and my wife and her sisters, the two of them, basically have never bothered to go out and get a driver’s licence, for whatever reason. It’s beyond me, but that’s their decision.

Quite often, parents are having to rely on the children to be able to move from point A to point B. For example, in my particular capacity as MPP, I haven’t been home—when’s the last time I’ve been home? One day every two weeks, I manage to storm into the house. The dog gets all excited. Misty, the black Lab, is excited for a day to see me. Then my wife is glad that I’m gone again.

The point is that you end up in a situation—with Marilyn, at least—where she relied on the girls when they were younger, living at home—yes, 16, 17, 18 years old—to drive her to do the things that she had to do when I wasn’t around there.

And the case of elderly parents is a huge issue in rural Ontario. Many times, the elderly parent who might be 70-some years old, who no longer can drive because of a medical condition, is not able to rely on their children because they’re working during the day, and are having to rely after school, or whenever it might be, on the student to drive them to an appointment. You’ve got to take this a little bit more seriously, because there is an effect for other people in the family, and I thought that was an interesting point. But stay tuned, I’m next.

Hon. Mrs. Dombrowsky: I’m happy to have the opportunity this evening to perhaps bring another rural perspective. The member for Perth–Middlesex and I, who have both raised our children in rural communities, will say that any piece of legislation that’s going to require young people to stay in an environment where they are learning until the age of 18 is really standing up for them, standing up for the importance of the human contribution they will make to the province of Ontario. That’s what this legislation is all about.

It has been acknowledged by the member from Nepean–Carleton that having a driver’s licence is a privilege. We believe in Ontario that to encourage young people and have them understand why it is so important that they continue their formal learning until the age of 18, they must understand that if they choose not to, they would be required to forfeit some privileges until the age of 18.

I also want to say as a mother of four that we’ve raised our children in a rural community. Two of our children worked on farms and both of them stayed in school until they were 18 years of age. Working on a farm does not necessarily mean they have to leave school. They are able to do both.

It’s important that we make it very clear for all students in Ontario that we encourage all of them, that we see the value in all of them, that we want them to understand why all of them should pursue a learning experience, whether it’s in a school setting, whether it’s in an apprenticeship setting, whether it’s on a farm, as long as they are learning. If it’s part of a co-operative experience, we support them in that experience.

Mr. Toby Barrett (Haldimand–Norfolk–Brant): I commend the member for Nepean–Carleton, Lisa MacLeod. Obviously, she has no use for this measure of yanking someone’s driver’s licence because they’re not 18 yet.

I’ve had an opportunity to visit the southern part of Lisa’s riding, a rural area. At many of the farms we visited, the next farmhouse was about a mile away. That’s a fair walk if you’ve got to do that regularly just to get to the next farmhouse. I represent a rural area. At harvest time and planting time it’s very important to have somebody on the farm who has a driver’s licence. Whoever’s running the farm oftentimes doesn’t have time to go into town to pick up employees or to pick up parts.

I do agree with the member. The McGuinty government is known for rules and regulations and red tape. It’s a draconian regime, in my view, that’s ascribing to nanny state-ism, and this is yet another reflection of that. Very simply: “Do this, don’t do that. The government knows what’s right for you.”

I feel that this legislation, the section about yanking someone’s driver’s licence, is something obviously dreamed up in Toronto and does not reflect reality. I feel it ignores people in northern Ontario, small-town Ontario and rural Ontario. I can’t imagine this McGuinty government doing the same thing to city kids. I can’t imagine this government—they’re trying to cover up a 30% dropout rate, which is shameful—yanking some kid’s TTC pass or taking away the OC Transpo pass. That’s the difference between this government and what we saw before.

Mrs. Maria Van Bommel (Lambton–Kent–Middlesex): I just want to comment on the comments of the member for Nepean–Carleton. One of the first things that struck me, among all the others—because she’s talking about rural, and as a farmer of course that always gets my

attention—is that she mentioned young pregnant teenagers. I have to wonder why you would not want them to have their education. Any time a young woman is left to take care of a child by herself, she needs her education more than anyone else. In my own riding I have seen many young women who have returned to school, and they have success stories that show and are examples to other young women like them.

2040

Another thing I want to talk about is the whole issue of the driver's licence in rural communities. I'm talking as a farmer when I say that we managed on our farm for many years before our kids got their driver's licences; I did my share of parts runs. If we had to do that again to make sure that our children got an education, we'd manage.

There was a time when the uneducated child was the one who stayed home and became a farmer. That's no longer the case. Farming is an industry, a business, and the individual who chooses to become a farmer needs to have that education. There is no reason to do anything that would discourage those children from getting that education. If it means you take the privilege of having a driver's licence to make sure they get the education they need, I say all the better. In my view as a farmer, we need the education—all kinds of it—to give our children.

The Acting Speaker: That concludes the time for questions and comments. I'll return to the member for Nepean–Carleton.

Ms. MacLeod: I want to thank the members from Timmins–James Bay, the Minister of Agriculture and the members from Haldimand–Norfolk–Brant and Lambton–Kent–Middlesex. I especially appreciate the comments from the Minister of Agriculture and her parliamentary assistant, because I think they added value to this debate. I think they gave us a different perspective.

Having said that, while I respect their view, I can't accept it. Fundamentally, I disagree with this because of what I said in the third line of my remarks: It's about choice. What we're talking about, living on the farm or pregnant teenagers—we should be offering these kids the choice. I benefited, when I had my daughter a year and a half ago, from spending a year of quality time at home with my daughter. I had that choice, and I believe that choice should be available to anybody. That is fundamentally where you and I will disagree. While I respect where you're coming from, I fundamentally cannot accept it.

I also want to talk briefly—because I only have a minute left—about something that's pretty predominant in my community, and that's home schooling. Nowhere do I see clarification that home-schooled children will not be affected by this legislation, and that is a big concern to me. If members opposite wish to clarify, then I'll be quite happy, but I haven't heard anything.

I'd like to read a letter that I know the minister received: “As a parent to two home-schooled children, I am concerned about how this bill might affect my children's ability to move freely in society and to attain an

important piece of identification, since their daily learning does not include attendance at a public or private school.”

I guess what it's all really about tonight is answering some of the unanswered questions, questions from throughout Ontario in different parts of society, not just in Toronto and not just in Nepean–Carleton but everywhere. I think what we need to do in the next stage of this bill is to clarify a few things and make some changes.

The Acting Speaker: Further debate?

Mr. Bisson: I am so glad to be here tonight to give my little contribution to this issue. I said earlier, in my responses to both Mr. Marchese and others who spoke, that I was surprised that the government actually called this legislation forward to be debated. The government proposes in this legislation, Bill 52, to say to young people in Ontario, “If you drop out of school between 16 and 18, we're going to yank your driver's licence, if you happen to have one, and if you don't have one, you will not be able to apply to get one.”

I was telling the story earlier that when I was in Smooth Rock Falls a couple of weeks ago, the school assembly met with me to talk about—we had a session on government and how it operates etc. You always do questions and comments with the kids after, and they asked me the question, “Mr. Bisson, we remember the government talking about that. Is it true that Mr. McGuinty wants to take away kids' driver's licence?” I said, “No, don't worry. In politics, we call that a trial balloon. The government put it out there just to see how it was going to float, saw it as not being so much of a positive idea and withdrew it.” I said that I thought a good indication that it wasn't going to be done is that Mr. Kennedy has moved on to federal politics—he wants to become the leader of the Liberal Party—and the current Minister of Education, Mrs. Papatello, the member from Windsor, is a very reasonable person. Certainly, knowing her political astuteness, she would say to her political staff and to the ministry if they brought this forward as an idea, “Get that away from me. That's silly.” Most of the kids who were there agreed and said yeah. We had a bit of a discussion about it. To be fair, one particular young woman there was quite articulate and quite bright and made the argument that she thought it was a good idea. But clearly, the majority of students at that assembly were very adamant in the position that they thought it wasn't such a good idea.

Let me talk to you about what I think the nub of the issue is. Mr. Yakabuski from the Conservative Party, the member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke said, as I did, that there's not a member in this House, of no matter what political party, who doesn't believe that we should be trying to deal with the issue of keeping young people in school as long as we can.

Listen, most of us are parents. My wife and I have been blessed. We have two wonderful daughters, Julie, now 29, and Natalie, now 24. Both went through high school and went off to university. As a matter of fact,

Julie did college for three years as a nurse. She went back to university to get her BScN and has now just completed her nurse practitioner degree. Our youngest daughter—we're just as proud of her—went off to university and did her studies in the issue of mental health. Both are now working in Timmins, one in the health field and the other in the mental health field. We're quite proud. We did all we could as parents to support and nurture our children so they could go on to school.

That's the key. Most parents do a fairly good job of supporting their kids, giving them the encouragement and support they need to complete their education and to understand that without the basics of education, it is hard to compete in this life. But we've got to recognize that not every child is as lucky as yours and mine. Julie and Natalie have been fortunate. They grew up in a fairly well-to-do middle-class family. My father was extremely literate. My father was always reading something or other of interest. I grew up at home with books and discussions at the dinner table in regards to everything from the economics of Europe in the 15th century to communism to what happened in Africa or South America in terms of the colonization in that part of the world. That stimulated me as a young person eventually to go off to school and do what I had to do.

I'm going to tell my story a little bit later. I actually dropped out of high school in grade 11, and I want to talk about that a little bit later and talk about what it would have meant to me. But my point is that most parents try to do a good job. Sometimes we fail as parents. We do the best we can, and the child, for whatever reason, either hangs out with the wrong crowd or the child him- or herself is not motivated; for whatever reason, they're just not able to cope with going to school. I know parents who are fine, upstanding citizens in our community who have children in high school who are absolutely struggling trying to keep their grade and not fail absolutely every subject in high school. It's not that the parents aren't trying. I talk to many of my neighbours, as you do. Sometimes a child is just not able to cut it. The reasons are many. Sometimes they're very awful reasons, such as physical abuse at home, where the child is not able to cope with what's happening in education because he's—

Interjections.

Mr. Bisson: Can I get you guys to carry on that conversation in maybe the other corner of the House? Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: I'll help. I would ask that the members who are around the member for Timmins—James Bay give him an opportunity to speak so I can hear him. I'll return to the member for Timmins—James Bay.

Mr. Bisson: I was about to join in the conversation, because they were talking about what's happening in Caledonia. I have a great interest, and I was sort of listening to what you were saying. So I ask if you're going to do that, just do it over there. I accept that that's an important issue.

Anyway, I was saying that for a number of reasons children at times end up dropping out of school because

they're not able to cope with what is going on in their own lives. We need to take that into consideration and say to those young kids, because they've dropped out of school, for whatever reason—sometimes a child drops out because of something awful happening in their life. It might be physical or sexual or mental abuse. It might be that the child is unable to cope with the socializing that happens in high school. We all know; we were in high school, most of us, and some of us may have experienced the awful difficulty that some children have in coping interpersonally with other children and in finding their place. They feel as if they're the odd duck out. For all kinds of reasons, people at one point give up.

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For us to say as a Legislature, “The way we're going to stop you from dropping out is by saying you're not going to get your driver's licence,” I think is a bit beyond the pale, because it might be the only thing that allows them to get employment. What do we do if a 17-year-old young woman or man drops out of school and decides that they want to go into the workforce? We've done everything we could to keep them in and the person decides to go. Do we say, “I'm sorry, you can't get a driver's licence, so therefore you can't get the means to transport yourself to and from work”?

I remember my first full-time job when I came out of the armed forces. I was older at that point. I worked at a mine that was about 100 kilometres out of the city of Timmins. If I couldn't drive, I couldn't work. It was as simple as that. That was the only job I could get at the time, working at Johns-Manville, at the Penhorwood mine, as an apprentice millwright.

My point is, if we want to keep kids in school, we have to find ways to support them in that endeavour. I think we do that by supporting parents. We do a lot of that already. We shouldn't beat ourselves over the head, because I think the province of Ontario is a fairly good example of some of the things we do well in order to support parents to keep their kids at school. We need to support teachers and principals and school boards so that they can do what they need to do in order to support keeping kids in schools. By and large, we've done a lot of good work. I look at a good friend, a guy who was quite influential with a lot of young people in our community, Marcel Camirand, who works specifically in a program to pick up these kids when they've dropped out of school and bring them back in when they're 16, 17, 18 or 19 years old. We had a lot of success. We gave the school board the money and the means to bring these kids back into the school and to adapt the education experience to one that they can relate to.

Some kids at 16 years old, for whatever reason—and I think that was my situation. I couldn't relate to school in the same way that others did because I didn't find it challenging. Most people know me. I don't consider myself uneducated, I don't consider myself unable to learn, but when I was in high school, man, I wasn't interested. The teaching method, the experience I was having at school as far as what they were challenging us

with when it came to education, I found really boring. The only things I found semi-interesting were mathematics, shop and history. They're the only things I found of some interest, but the rest of it was quite a bit of a bore for me. So when I was barely 17 years old, I decided to drop out of high school and join the armed forces. Are you saying to a young person like me, who decided I want to serve my country—at the time, rightly, wrongly, for whatever reason, I decided to do that—that somehow or other I shouldn't get a driver's licence because I decided to join the armed forces? The law federally says I can join the armed forces when I'm 17 years old. Are we going to say provincially that because this young man or woman has decided to drop out of high school to join the armed forces to do whatever, they can't have a driver's licence? We've got to look at the reality of what happens out there.

Interjection.

Mr. Bisson: Well, it's the reality. We have to look at the reality of why kids drop out.

So what do we need to do? It's one thing for me to stand in this House and criticize the government for what I think is a wrong-headed direction about how we keep kids in school. I wholeheartedly disagree that it's by a punitive way of saying, "You're going to stay in school or else you lose your driver's licence." So let me take the last part of my speech to talk about what I think we need to be doing to keep kids in school.

I talked about Marcel Camirand as a good example, and there are others in other school boards in my riding who do the same thing. We need to tailor education so it fits people. We can't have a cookie-cutter approach to education that says, "Every child has got to fit inside this mould. All the children who go to high school, in grades 10, 11, 12, are going to have to fit here or else there's nowhere for them." We're going to lose kids if we do that. I think we have to be adaptive.

I know my good friend the member from Brant would understand. He was an educator. We need to find ways of challenging kids so that the education experience is fulfilling, rewarding and interesting so that they stay. We do some of that now, but we need to do a better job of it. We have to say to young people, like I was when I was in high school, "All right, if this experience doesn't work for you, what does?" Do you know what it was for me? I was really good at learning things on my own and reading. I remember when I was taking English in primary school I never used to pay attention to the English class. The teacher would go to the front and do the spelling stuff on the blackboard. I would sit there. I wasn't paying any attention. I was looking out the window. Until one teacher came up to me—and this is the beauty of good educators—and said, "Gilles, how come you can't pay attention?" I said, "I find it boring." She brought reading labs in. I excelled and advanced above my peers by working on the independent reading labs because that's the way that I was able to learn.

We need to recognize in the education system that not every kid learns the same way, so for kids in both pri-

mary and secondary school, we have to ask, how can we better serve those young persons so that they're able to learn in a way that makes sense for them? Others, for example, are probably interested in doing things more along the lines of non-academic study as far as the goal of going to university and getting a master's or a PhD. Other people might say, "I'd love to be an electrician," "I'd love to be a truck driver," "I'd love to be a municipal sanitary worker," or whatever it might be. What's wrong with that? We need those people. They're the ones who make our communities work. There's nothing wrong with those jobs. They pay fairly well and they're fairly technical nowadays. Imagine a water plant operator—the math, physics, biology, chemistry, the science—all the things you need to know to run a water plant.

You've got young people, 15 or 16 years old, when they're hitting high school, saying, "Hey, man, this ain't for me. I don't want to go off to do any fancy-dancy education. I know what I want to do." And some kids do know what they want to do, and when they say, "I want to move on to some skilled trade or semi-professional trade," we need to develop the programs to support those kids. We're terrible in Ontario and Canada in dealing with apprenticeship training. Why is apprenticeship training something that's done basically in the workplace only when the person is 20, 30 or 40 years old?

We should be allowing children in high school to start streaming themselves—yes, I say "streaming" themselves; that's their choice—toward getting into a skilled trade. For example, I knew what I wanted to do when I was in high school. I wanted to serve in the armed forces, because I grew up in a family where my father and my uncles all served in the war in one capacity or another. I grew up on the stories. It was fascinating to me, and I wanted to see what that experience was all about. I went out and did it. But when I was in high school, I knew I wanted to be an electrician. Funny, right? I also knew I wanted to be a politician, but I figured I had to work a little bit before getting into that. Another story, another day.

I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to either go into electronics or electricity, because that's what interested me. I was fascinated by the mathematics of the trade and I was fascinated by the theory of the trade. I knew what I wanted to do, but I had no ability to apprentice and stream myself into an education that would get me to my trade. Instead, they gave me a whack of stuff that I wasn't interested in when I was 16 years old, so I dropped out. If we don't properly support kids at the primary and high school level, decide how we better serve them, they're going to drop out. So put in place the building blocks that are necessary to allow kids to stay in school of their own volition.

Here's the kicker—and my good friend Ms. Wynne will know this because she comes out of education—we can spend all the money in the world and we can design all the best programs in the world, and you're still going to get kids who will drop out. What do you do with them? That's the tough spot. Do we say to them, "We're

going to withdraw your driver's licence"? I say, not. I think there are children, or young adults at that age, who are going to drop out of school for a host of reasons which I talked about before. What do we do for them? In some cases, it might be an issue of counselling.

My youngest daughter works in mental health. She works for the Canadian Mental Health Association. Natalie is, as I am, very interested in politics, and we get a lot of discussions going. Over the past little while, we've been talking about the percentage of people in our society who have some form of mental health disorder. It's scary. About 25% of our society suffers from some sort of mental disorder. It might be depression. It might be varying forms of psychoses. It might be early stages of schizophrenia. It might be a number of things. Not everybody is as endowed and lucky as we are, to have grown up and come out the other end with our heads screwed on straight and able to think for ourselves. There are people who, because of what happens to them—and we don't understand, quite frankly, what happens to the human brain—are not able to make good decisions. What do you do with people like that?

My own sister is schizophrenic. I love Louise a lot. She's 54 years old. She's a wonderful woman, but she's schizophrenic. When she was younger, when she was about 14 or 15, we saw those signs, and we didn't know what to do. It wasn't until much later in life, until it manifested itself in some pretty bad experiences, that we finally figured out what it was, and through the medical community and organizations like the mental health association, we started providing the support and the kind of programming and care that she needed so she is now able to live a very good life. But she had a lot of very bad years, and the family had a lot of bad years with her.

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Louise actually did finish high school. She was one of those who was quite brilliant. I think that's the case with a lot of people who suffer schizophrenia. But my point is that mental health problems in children may not manifest themselves in the way that people think. You may look normal, you may look very together, but if you're a young person suffering with a mental health disorder, it is not going to be easy for you to graduate high school.

What do you do if a young child has dyslexia and is not able to read? As a matter of fact, I was talking to one young person in my constituency office last month, and the parents came in because they're trying to deal with this. The young guy is in grade 11—you're what, 16, 17 at the time—and can barely read and write. He has severe dyslexia. The kid is just not passing anything in high school. The argument those parents were making to me was, "My child wants to stay in school, he wants to do well, but doesn't have the capacity to do it." What they wanted to know is, how can they arrange for him to graduate—he actually was in grade 12, because they were trying to figure out how he can graduate. It's kind of hard if he hasn't passed any of the subjects.

What do you do with children like that? Do you withdraw the driver's licence because a child suffers from

dyslexia or some form of mental disorder? You can't do these things.

I just say to the government, I give you some marks for trying to do something. I don't for one second stand in the House here and say, "Oh, you're a bunch of no-good-for-nothings." Every government of every stripe tries to do the right thing in the best way they know how. But I'm just saying to you, this is really a step in the wrong direction. If we want to encourage kids to stay in school, we've got to do the things that are going to encourage them to stay in school by providing the types of supports they need in order to do it, and recognizing that in the end some kids aren't going to make it.

Does it mean to say we give up? Absolutely not. We need to look at the core reasons of why. I talked about the mental health issue as just one. There are many others. I know other people in this House will be able to speak to that to a greater degree.

That was the contribution I wanted to make in this particular debate. I encourage the government members to think about this. I would imagine the government majority will carry this at second reading. I think we should let this thing go to committee and die an actual death where it should. This is not a bill that, quite frankly, we should be taking anywhere past the second reading debate just to see how people think.

If we really are serious about dealing with this, and I know you are—all the government members and opposition members come here, and we're well-intentioned. We try to do the right thing. We may approach different issues from different perspectives, but we're all trying to get to the same place. I just implore you, don't do this. This is regressive. I think a lot of children could be harmed by way of this legislation.

The Acting Speaker: Questions and comments?

Ms. Kathleen O. Wynne (Don Valley West): Thank you, Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Bisson: Hold it. Hang on. I didn't knock the Tories. I forgot.

Ms. Wynne: The member for Timmins–James Bay raises a lot of interesting points and makes our argument. The member for Timmins–James Bay has made the argument for why we need this legislation and the programs that support this legislation, the policy that backs up this legislation.

What we're doing is exactly what he has called for: tailor-making education, making programs and possibilities of programs and combinations of programs that will help the very students that the member was talking about. We are doing a number of things. We're allowing students to group together some of their technical programs and begin to—I'm not going to use the word "stream"; he used the word "stream"—specialize in particular areas, so in the construction sector, in the hospitality sector, in the information technology and health care, there are programs, there are courses within the high school curriculum that students can now take, and they can group them together. What that does is it

signals to the employer or to the college or the university that that student has a certain amount of expertise.

That's a way of customizing education. We're allowing students to count two more co-op credits as part of their mandatory courses. That allows kids to broaden those mandatory courses.

There are exemptions. For students who are in extreme circumstances or are ill, where there are mitigating circumstances, this legislation allows for exemptions around the penalties.

I think it's important that you look at the aspects of the legislation and the policies we are putting in place that are actually about providing programs for kids who, like you, the member for Timmins–James Bay, might not have wanted to stay in school; or even if they leave, allowing them to come back in a way that will make them want to say stay.

Mr. Barrett: I should explain to the member from Timmins–James Bay that we were speaking about Caledonia and James Bay. It was relevant for your presentation. We didn't want to take away from that. I received some very good advice with respect to Six Nations from the member for Timmins–James Bay. He knows of what he speaks.

I don't think the McGuinty licence cancellation program would work very well at Six Nations or at New Credit or at Attawapiskat or at Moose Factory or at Moosonee. In this case, I think we would see different rules for different peoples.

If this government takes away a licence, it does sentence people to sit at home, and it's pretty difficult for some people to get to school without a driver's licence. I don't think we're seeing legislation here to take away a snowmobile licence or the use of an ATV or a bicycle. We're not talking about taking horses away from Mennonite young people. We're not hearing any discussion of taking a TTC pass away from a Toronto student and limiting their mobility. Thankfully, with this legislation, in contrast to other legislation from this government, they aren't talking about cancelling somebody's hunting or fishing licence, something that has nothing to do with the particular piece of legislation that was implemented at that time.

To take away a young person's driver's licence at Six Nations I feel is laughable. That's laughable like the situation on April 20 where a number of Six Nations people were arrested—they were caught—and taken to court. They were let out again. It's laughable. Six Nations people there refer to that as catch-and-release.

Mrs. Van Bommel: I want to comment on the remarks by the member for Timmins–James Bay. He talked about people having different ways of learning, and I absolutely agree. I have five children, and all five of them have had different combinations of ways to learn.

As a government, we recognize that there are different ways to learn so we do offer options. One of the things we've done is to offer our rural lighthouse program. I was really pleased when we brought that one out because we came forward with a program that actually re-

introduced agriculture and horticulture back into the curriculum. As a young student myself, there was the option in a rural community to have that, and then we lost it. I was really glad to see it come back into our communities. In particular, in my riding we have an école secondaire catholique in Pain Court. I apologize for my French; it's probably more Dutch than it is French. But the program is called *De la terre à la table*—From the Soil to the Table—and it is talking to students who are interested in agriculture. If you know Pain Court, you know it is in the middle of Kent county in some of the richest soils we have in the province. A lot of students who attend that high school are farmers, and they learn things they can take back to those farms and make their operations on those farms better. We address that interest. We take that interest seriously, and we recognize that not everybody learns on an academic level. Some want technological and trades types of training and co-op programs, and we do that through the rural lighthouse program. We recognize the differences in styles of learning.

Mr. Yakabuski: When the debate is going on in this House and the Liberal government doesn't like the tenor of the way things are going somewhat, you get to hear it on this side of the House. The sanctimonious drivel starts to drip and just flow across the aisle here. They stand there and say things like, "Our kids" and "Why are they against the children?" and this and that. It's just such a load of crap. They would like to paint everybody else who doesn't agree with them as somehow being against children getting an education. How ridiculous is that? How utterly, absolutely and stupidly ridiculous is that? It's hardly worth comment.

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No one in this House suggests for a moment that children shouldn't get every bit of education that they have an opportunity to get. However, the steps you're willing to take to enter George Orwell's brave new world of 1984 to force people to do something that is absolutely against their will—that's what separates us. This government believes that if you're not following their socially engineered brave new world, they're going to take your driver's licence. That's not the way you keep kids in school. You make what's happening in those classrooms relevant, you make it exciting and you make it attractive. You make them want to be there. That's how you keep kids in school. If there's something there that is drawing people, they'll be there with bells on, enjoying every minute of it.

The Acting Speaker: The member for Timmins–James Bay has two minutes to reply.

Mr. Bisson: I should get three minutes because I left one on the clock.

Anyway, I didn't once attack the Tories. What's wrong with me? I'm slipping, Mr. Runciman. I'll do that later.

I just say to my good friend the member from Don Valley West, who said I made the argument for you, come on, really. I said in my speech that every govern-

ment has put programs and initiatives in place to assist school boards to keep kids in school. My point was that it doesn't matter if you put all those programs in place, do the best you can and there's no more to be done: At the end of the day, you will still have children drop out of school for a whole host of other reasons. I talked about mental illness and others, abuse at home—whatever it might be. What do you do? You penalize those people. It's like I was saying to my friend in the seat next to me. It's a little bit like saying that if a worker decides that he or she is going to drop out of the workplace and drop out of the economy, we're going to penalize them by taking away their driver's licence. We would never do something like that. There is a question of choice.

The member from Haldimand–Norfolk–Brant raises a point that I am totally remiss for not having raised, and that is the effect of this on First Nations. Listen, I want to be really straight here. In communities that I represent on James Bay, there's a very high percentage of children who don't graduate, who drop out of school. Never mind grade 9; we're talking grade 7, grade 8. The reasons for that are many. We're talking about 20 or 25 kids per household. How does that child study? How does that child have any normalcy in the family when you've got all those people tracking in and out of the house at all hours of the night? They're not able to study. Do we say to those children, "Too bad, so sad. We haven't provided the reserve system with adequate housing. It's not our fault as a province. We're just going to take away your ability to have a driver's licence," and pull that kid out of the economy altogether? I think that has some serious repercussions.

I just say to members, let this thing go to committee; let it die a natural death. I think we're all smart enough to know that this is a really bad idea. Quite frankly, I'm surprised it's ever seen the light of day.

The Acting Speaker: I wish to inform the House that we've now passed the seven-hour threshold. For the remainder of this debate at second reading, the speeches will be 10 minutes in length.

Mr. Delaney: It has been a long evening. I say to people who are watching that if you're tuning in, perhaps you've been playing roulette with the remote, perhaps you're not a World Cup fan, and you certainly know that there's no Hurricanes-Oilers game on tonight, or perhaps—just perhaps—you're interested in Bill 52, an act that covers learning to age 18.

Mr. Yakabuski: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker: In keeping with the standing orders, could I ask that the member speak to the bill?

The Acting Speaker: The member for Mississauga West has the floor.

Mr. Delaney: I guess my friend owes me a few of those.

Let's be optimistic. You're probably watching this channel because you're a student. Maybe you're watching to see how this bill is going to affect you or your friends. Maybe you're an employer. Maybe it pains you to see young men and women drop out of high school,

maybe ending up on social assistance, living a life with fairly little direction and even less hope. Maybe you're a hard-working student, hitting the books every night. You want to do something with your life, but some of the kids are telling you that you're a sucker, that you can drop out, get yourself some wheels, live the good life: "Life will be good. Drop out." It's all too common. As recently as the fall of 2003, one in three Ontario high school students didn't finish. One in three didn't get their high school diploma, didn't give themselves a future.

Bill 52 says that Ontario's boys and girls will grow into young men and women as they develop the habit of lifelong learning. What does lifelong learning mean? Men and women who qualify for the professions acquire the habit. They arrange their life to spend some 10 or 15 days each year advancing their skills. Mechanics keep their skills up to date; so do workers in the trades. My colleague from Timmins–James Bay was telling his story about joining the army. When you join the army, one of the first things they teach you is a trade. Self-employed people spend their money to keep themselves up to date.

Bill 52 is about starting that good habit of lifelong learning. It does it by saying that students will learn until age 18. But only in the school environment, as some opposition members suggest in the full flight of rhetorical flourish? Certainly not. Co-op learning counts. Apprenticeships count. They're most certainly learning experiences. Community support programs count. Equivalent learning that falls outside the traditional school instruction counts.

The members who spread their arms and wonder and huff and puff about the school environment miss Bill 52's salient point. We worry that sometimes the sustained gusts of superheated air may pick some members right up off the floor and float them across the aisle into perhaps the waiting arms of one of the government members. But we digress.

We are making some progress. Ontario's graduation rate is up from 68% under our education-bashing predecessors, who stumped for private schools as they starved the world's oldest and best public education system for funds. Ontario's graduation rate is now 71%. From merely two out of three, Ontario is now graduating better than seven out of 10 from secondary school. Last year, 6,000 more Ontario students graduated from secondary school because our graduation rate climbed just three percentage points. New co-op, apprenticeship and community support programs will help some 90,000 more young adults graduate in the next few years. Contrast this with the government that Ontarians spurned almost three years ago. That government left 45,000 students each year without a secondary school diploma.

Out there, perhaps there is someone who's working hard and paying his or her taxes, who shrugs his shoulders and says, "So what?" Well, so what? Let's look at what. Ontario's unemployment rate for high school drop-outs is almost double the average. High school drop-outs are much more likely to end up on social assistance. In our prison population, literacy rates are

notoriously low. "So what?" you might say. What Ontario replies is that if you work hard, keep your skills current and pay your taxes, then you want your sons and daughters and their friends to be self-sufficient, to be self-supporting, to lead independent lives, to rise above mere survival and to pay their share of taxes too.

To students, that's why learning is so important. If you develop the habit by 18, you'll likely keep it for the rest of your life. You're going to need that lifelong learning habit, because in the next two decades 40% of new jobs are going to be in skilled trades and technologies, in the good jobs of tomorrow. You don't need your skills to get obsolete, because your skills can get obsolete and mouldy almost as fast as last week's loaf of bread.

But don't just take my word for it. Listen to this quote from a student from St. Augustine Secondary School. This student says, and I'm quoting from the Brampton Guardian, "I'm looking at the armed forces. The armed forces provide 107 different job opportunities. They pay for college, provide top-notch career training and have good pay and health coverage." That's from a 20-year-old. That's from somebody who gets it. This government agrees with that youth. This government agrees with today's youth, and the goal of this government is to cut the dropout rate to half of what it is now over the next five years. That would mean 90,000 more students graduating.

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Nobody has questioned high school dropout rates since the 1950s, not since the Edsel was a brand new car, not since Elvis topped the charts, not since the Beatles were still the Quarrymen singing for their supper in smoky clubs in Liverpool and Germany. A buck an hour was a decent wage, and if houses came with a garage back then, it was only for a single car. That's how long it has been since somebody questioned whether or not a student should drop out at age 16.

I say to my esteemed colleagues in the party that Ontarians tossed out back in 2003 and to the party that Ontarians graciously relieved of the accidental burden of government in 1995 that the 1950s are just so 20th century. This is the 21st century. This is the best place in the world to get a job making a car. You've got to keep your skills up to date if you want to keep those good jobs, if you get them.

This is 21st-century Ontario. Hollywood comes here when they need technologists to do computer-generated animation. That's not a university course. That's a course that you need high school graduation for and you need a real aptitude with computers. Those jobs are all about continuous learning. What you learn, where you learn it, how you learn it and when you learn it are flexible, but learn it and keep learning. Learning to keep learning is a must.

To employers who are wondering who is going to replace their aging workforce, Ontario says Bill 52 is about finding you another 90,000 young, educated workers to choose from.

To the parents of today's high school students, I echo the sentiments of my friend and colleague from Perth-Middlesex and I say that while some parties may have their heads in mid-20th century sand, we're not one of them. Your sons and daughters are going to have the best start, the best chance and the best support our province can provide. Others might write off your children. They might write them off as road kill on the path to success, but this is a government that won't.

To students: If you stay in school, you're no sucker. If you stay in school, you're doing the right thing. If you stay in school, the future is yours. And the future is yours if you develop the habit of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning doesn't mean hitting the books in high school. Lifelong learning may mean working with your hands. Lifelong learning may mean working with wood. Lifelong working may be learning how to fix a car. Lifelong learning may be doing a trade in the building industry. That's what lifelong learning is.

Lifelong learning means you've got some structure. Lifelong learning means that you're investing in yourself. That's what Bill 52 is saying. Bill 52 is saying, do it until the age of 18. Bill 52 says that at 18, if you're old enough to vote, if you're old enough to join the armed forces, we think that as an adult you can make your decisions, but until the age of 18, we're saying, please, focus on learning. It may not necessarily be in a classroom, it may not mean looking at a blackboard and it may not mean listening to a high school teacher, though we hope it will. But learn the habit of keeping your skills up to date, learn to enjoy the exercise of learning, and the future is well and truly yours. Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Questions and comments?

Mr. Miller: It's my pleasure to add some comments to the speech from the member from Mississauga West. I'm pleased he was able to get through his whole speech this evening. I know he was doing his report on the use of technology in the Legislature yesterday, I guess it was, and he got kind of cut off by the Speaker on that.

I don't disagree with a lot of the points that the member was making in his speech. He talked about the good things to do with more apprenticeships, with co-op learning—those are all good things. He gave us a history lesson as well. But I say that this legislation, Bill 52, which forces kids to stay in school until they're 18, is not practical and has not been well thought out.

When it was first introduced, I listened to a CBC program. They had three different students on that radio program and asked them how they felt about the legislation. They were all kids who had all dropped out of school, gained some real-world experience and then went back to finish their education and were doing very well. They felt it's just not practical, that it may do more harm than good, even though it may be well-meaning.

In many cases, there are kids who just aren't ready to learn, for a variety of different issues. In many cases, they need that real-world experience to make them realize that the real world is fairly tough and that maybe getting more education and providing themselves with

the skills and ability to earn more and gain more satisfaction from a job is a worthwhile thing to do.

As well-meaning as this bill might be, it is my feeling that it may do more harm than good, particularly in rural areas where, when you take a licence away, you penalize the employer and take away the ability of a young person to earn some money.

Mr. Bisson: To the member from—

Interjection.

Mr. Bisson: Mississauga West. Thank you. As my good friend Mr. Miller said, from whatever riding he's from—

Mr. Yakabuski: Parry Sound–Muskoka.

Mr. Bisson: Parry Sound–Muskoka. I'm sorry. I will never, I promise, run for Speaker, because I won't remember all the riding names. I've been here for 16 years and still can't remember.

Mr. Yakabuski: I will never, I promise, vote for you for Speaker.

Mr. Bisson: Oh, good, because I don't want the job.

Anyway, none of us disagrees in this House. That was the whole purpose of what I was saying about the goal of trying to keep kids in schools. Much of what you talked about in terms of the need to invest properly in continuing education and lifelong learning—that's easy as pie. We all accept that. Every government has made investments in that direction in order not only to help keep people in school but to recognize the value of education and the worth of it to our economy.

But I really fail to see how pulling somebody's driver's licence at age 16 or 17 or preventing somebody from having a driver's licence is a good, progressive piece of legislation from the party that purports itself to be—as he said, “Oh, we're hip and we're the only ones whose heads aren't in the sand.” That's the kind of stuff they used to talk about in the olden days, the kind of punitive measures you're trying to come forward with today. A modern government and a government that's on the cutting edge wouldn't be looking the punitive measure of holding back a driver's licence, because they'd recognize that there are many people in our society who, for a whole host of reasons, may not be able to complete high school. I'm not saying that's good, but that's a reality.

What about children with mental health disorders? What about children who are suffering various forms of abuse at home and are not able to study? What about children who are dyslexic, who have learning disabilities, who may not be able to get a high school diploma? Many kids drop out of high school for many reasons. We need to try to identify what those reasons are, deal with them and support them in whatever they do in the future. Pulling their driver's licence is punitive. I think it's a sign of the past.

The Acting Speaker: Questions and comments? The Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities.

Hon. Mrs. Chambers: I would particularly like to comment on the remarks of the member from Timmins–James Bay. I was struck by his passion and I agree with

most of what he has to say, but I think it's wrong to place as much emphasis as has been placed in this Legislature on the matter of the driver's licence. I'm not persuaded that that is the right incentive or penalty. But I would encourage you to take that thought to committee to make sure this does not die a natural death simply because of that particular suggestion.

I agree, for example, that kids need different opportunities that appeal to their particular interests. I agree with very much of what the member from Timmins–James Bay had to say about how kids learn differently and what kinds of supports they really do need to be successful. He made reference to apprenticeship training in this province being something that's typically available to 20-, 30- and 40-year-olds. I agree that that's too late, but that's exactly why we have well more than 13,000 high school students involved in the Ontario youth apprenticeship program as we speak. Kids in those programs love what they are doing and will excel at what they enjoy doing.

What we do know is that kids who do not complete a high school education are depriving themselves of opportunities to be successful, because the opportunities for a young person who has not completed a high school education are indeed very, very limited.

I would urge the member from Timmins–James Bay, who is clearly very passionate about this, to work on other solutions along with this government.

The Acting Speaker: I apologize to the minister. I should have recognized her as the Minister of Children and Youth Services.

There is time for one last question and comment.

Mr. Runciman: It's not surprising that the members from Etobicoke or other urban areas don't understand this issue. I think it's reflective of the views of this government with respect to rural and small-town Ontario issues. They simply do not understand those concerns so they tend not to be reflected in legislation developed by the Liberal government.

Most of us were hoping that, with the disappearance of Mr. Kennedy to greener financial pastures, this legislation would die on the order paper. I think my friend from James Bay mentioned that as well. We just couldn't believe that you were going to pursue this, but indeed you are. So we hope that after it receives second reading it will disappear into the ether of legislation that was ill-thought-out and should not have reached the stage it has already reached.

One of the things that hasn't been referenced tonight, and I think we should talk a bit about it, is home-schoolers. I've certainly had some home-schoolers come to my constituency office very concerned about this legislation if it becomes law, in terms of what rights they have and what recognition there is for home-schooling. I happen to know a lot of people who have home-schooled their kids. My brother and his wife home-schooled their kids, and they're now in university. They home-schooled them through the primary grades and high school, and they've done extremely well in college and university. To leave them outside of this and not address those kinds of

issues is negligence of the highest order. We should be exempting home-schoolers, as one example, or in some way, shape or form recognizing that the parents' word should be accepted when we're talking about a driver's licence or employment. Those are issues that have to be addressed when this bill goes to committee.

The Acting Speaker: The member for Mississauga West has two minutes to reply.

Mr. Delaney: Thank you very much, Speaker, and not merely for the chance to reply but for the last word in the debate.

I say to my friends from Parry Sound–Muskoka and Leeds–Grenville that I certainly don't agree with trying to make this an urban-rural division; I don't agree with a home school as opposed to a public school division, and neither does Ontario. You're not going to gain that real-world experience, I say to my friend from Parry Sound–Muskoka, unless you've got an education, unless you've shown that you've acquired the ability to learn.

To my friend from Timmins–James Bay, who addressed the issue of the driver's licence, Rhode Island, California and West Virginia have found that losing your

driver's licence actually does work. In West Virginia, 493 out of 589 students who lost their licences returned to school. Tennessee found the same. Tennessee and West Virginia: Ontarians cannot be so proud as not to absorb the best practices of jurisdictions such as these in the United States.

This is a balanced bill, it's a progressive bill. It's the first time in more than 50 years that we've looked at the assumption that children should be able to leave school at age 16. It's not the 19th century. It's not an agrarian economy, it's a knowledge economy. It isn't so much how strong you are, it's how smart you are and how willing you are to learn. This is what Bill 52 focuses on; this is the real value of Bill 52. This is what Bill 52 is going to do to help make Ontario stronger: by making sure that we have a workplace that can meet the challenges and the jobs and the opportunities of tomorrow. That's why Bill 52 is a bill that should be supported, and that's why I'll vote for it.

The Acting Speaker: It being past 9:30 of the clock, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

The House adjourned at 2134.

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