Education
Could you begin by introducing the experience and vision you bring to your position as Minister of Education?

I have been involved in education in Ontario for over 25 years. Elected first as a trustee in 1988 to a local public school board and later in 2003 as a Member of Provincial Parliament, I have been part of many different initiatives to improve our system, including leading the Government’s Safe Schools Action Team to make Ontario schools safe and accepting for all. Now, as the Minister of Education, I am focused on ensuring our students’ success and their wellbeing continue to be at the forefront of all our policies as we move to implement Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario. The Province of Ontario is already recognised as a global leader in public education, and I want to build on that strong foundation to reach further and achieve excellence.

This is an exciting time for education in Ontario – the world is watching how we build on the progress we have made in the last 10 years to make one of the best early years and education systems even better.

In 2014, you launched Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario. Could you provide an overview of the key highlights of this landmark initiative?

Ontario’s ‘Renewed Vision for Education’ focuses on what our citizens view as essential outcomes for children and students – ensuring they have the talent and skills needed and are prepared to lead in a global economy.

Our renewed vision for education is built on the four goals of: achieving excellence, ensuring equity, promoting wellbeing and enhancing public confidence. It will stimulate students in our education system to develop the knowledge, skills and characteristics that will lead them to become personally successful, economically productive and actively engaged citizens. Ontario’s education system will cultivate and continuously develop a high-quality teaching profession and strong leadership at all levels of the system. It will be a responsive, accessible and integrated system from early learning and childcare to adult education. We will be working with our education partners and community as we transform this system.

How is education expected to evolve in the coming years? What action is being taken now to prepare for those changes?

With technology playing an increasingly significant role inside and outside of the classroom, an important aspect of our renewed vision is to embrace the role of technology in supporting teaching and learning. That is why we are providing over CAD $150 million over three years through a Technology and Learning Fund to invest in digital technology and learning tools such as tablets and software for Ontario classrooms, as well as professional development opportunities for educators. With this fund we are taking steps to modernise and transform our classrooms, and support educators’ efforts to bring more innovation to learning.

Through this investment, we expect to see an increasing emphasis on experiential learning which can be facilitated by technology. For example, students in isolated northern communities are increasingly using technology to connect with teachers and students in urban schools.

Supporting the next generation of entrepreneurs and innovators is important to any economy. How is the education system working to ensure it turns out graduates that have the relevant skills and know-how required in an ever-changing technological world?

While the foundational skills of reading, writing and mathematics remain a focus in Ontario, employers have also told us that they are seeking graduates with higher-
To find out more about Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario visit: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/about/renewedVision.pdf

order skills like critical thinking, creativity and innovation. Our renewed vision for education sets out a plan to define, measure and cultivate these attributes, so young people will have the skills they need to lead in the global economy. For example, our Specialist High Skills Majors programme, a specialised programme of eight to 10 courses that provide experiential learning opportunities to secondary students in a specific economic sector, will now start incorporating training in innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship into all its programmes.

We have also implemented a Science and Innovation Strategy to support STEM education. It will provide equitable access to resources and professional learning to improve student engagement and achievement in STEM-related areas.

In addition, we are also building strong relationships with community, business and not-for-profit partners to provide opportunities for our students with new and more authentic learning experiences, and help connect them with potential careers in STEM disciplines.

**Minority groups and women often face a number of barriers to studying STEM subjects and rising to leadership positions within these fields. How is this issue being addressed through Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario, of which one of its four key goals is ensuring equity?**

Promotion of STEM subjects among all our students is a personal goal of mine. I firmly believe that through increasing confidence in science and technology-related learning we can improve student engagement and achievement in STEM disciplines.

We provide funding to a number of organisations to promote participation of females and underserved students in STEM disciplines. For example, we partner with FIRST Robotics to promote female participation in robotics competitions and support Skills Canada-Ontario’s Outreach Program to raise awareness of the skilled trades and technologies through classroom activities and presentations.

Ontario also launched a pilot programme last year to help our Aboriginal students develop business and entrepreneurial skills. Students can receive funding to start their own businesses and will be mentored by established Aboriginal business owners.

**Ontario is one of the most diverse jurisdictions in the world. How does the education system cater for students with such a broad spectrum of backgrounds, capabilities and needs?**

Ontario is recognised locally, nationally and internationally for its efforts to build and sustain an equitable and inclusive education system.

We have closed the gap in student achievement between students who do not speak the language of instruction at home and all students, from 23 per cent in 2003 to just 4 per cent in 2014, and we narrowed the achievement gap between boys and girls. As pointed out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), this was achieved through consistent application of centrally driven pressure for better results from all students, combined with extensive capacity building for differentiated instruction and a climate of relative trust and mutual respect. This includes new programmes and targeted interventions to engage students at risk of lower achievement.

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We are also implementing our Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy to help the education community identify and remove discriminatory biases and systemic barriers in order to support student achievement and wellbeing. Every school board in Ontario is now required to have an equity and inclusive education policy in place.

Ontario’s education system has witnessed a number of key successes, particularly in raising literacy and numeracy standards, and turning out more graduates. Are there any other accomplishments that you would like to highlight?

As our vision looks to integrate education from early learning to childcare, the biggest transformation in Ontario’s education system in a generation was the introduction of a full-day kindergarten programme. It is now available to every four- and five-year-old in Ontario. Through a full day of play-based learning with teachers and early childhood educators in classrooms, students develop the social, emotional, academic and physical skills that provide the foundation for success in school and beyond. These students are now better prepared for Grade 1 and to be more successful in school.

Over the years, we have seen growing evidence demonstrating student wellbeing as an important element of overall student success. Students cannot achieve academically if they feel unsafe at school or are bullied online. And they cannot be their best if they are not given the tools and motivation to adopt a healthy, active lifestyle, both in and outside of school. That is why we have moved wellbeing of students to the centre of our education system’s priorities. Our overall system must now learn together and build capacity to support our students.