

## McGuinty should ensure safe schools

Editorial – Feb. 20, 2007

Dalton McGuinty dropped in on Kitchener Friday to explain his new plan for building character in Ontario high school students. But as the premier delivered words bursting with sunshine and warm, fuzzy feelings, there was a warning from the Ontario Principals' Council that his building project might not proceed as smoothly planned. It was a warning the premier and everyone interested in the welfare of the province's students should heed.

Based on what they are witnessing in their everyday working lives, the principals believe young people across Ontario now face an increased risk of physical harm when they attend school. Reports of bullying, assaults and vandalism at schools are all on the rise, the principals say. And the reason? New labour contracts that have cut the amount of supervisory work teachers put in.

"We have heard from hundreds of principals who have identified situations in schools that are worrisome and unacceptable to us and of great concern to parents," said council president Blair Hilts. "We have the legislative responsibility for keeping schools safe . . . yet we are struggling to do so because of the supervision limits in collective agreements."

Perhaps feeling defensive, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario voiced skepticism about the report. But the principals shouldn't be accused of teacher bashing. In fact, they want the government to spend \$200 million not only to set minimum standards for supervising students at elementary and secondary schools but to hire more staff to get the job done. And they are fully supported by the parent group, People For Education.

This is a matter the premier and Education Minister Kathleen Wynne need to examine. It's sounds great for McGuinty to talk about somehow making honesty, compassion, empathy, generosity, courage and responsibility part of Ontario's school curriculum. But he can only build the character of students on a foundation of safe and secure schools.

And the principals are convinced that this foundation is cracking because students are not being supervised enough. Some elementary schools are so short of supervisory staff that they using older children to watch over the younger kids. Not only is this questionable in terms of its effectiveness, it could leave the public education system facing a costly lawsuit if a youngster being improperly supervised were injured.

There is great irony in this situation. As McGuinty reminded the teachers at Kitchener's St. Marys High School last week, his government has added 6,800 teachers to the province's schools since being elected in 2003. And these new positions came in a time of declining student enrolment provincewide. But

despite having thousands of more teachers in their schools, the principals are adamant that there is too little adult supervision for students.

Only eight months remain before the next provincial election when McGuinty asks Ontario voters for another mandate. When that election is fought, McGuinty will surely highlight all the things his government has done for the education system -- that, indeed, was one of the reasons he was in Kitchener. But when he touts all those budgetary and staffing statistics, when he says how well his government works with educators, how will he answer the simple yet unavoidable question: Who's minding the kids?