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Spotlight Session: Building Better Education Together

Saturday October 7th, 2017

Hon. Dalton McGuinty, Former Premier of Ontario, Canada

Moderated/Facilitated by: **Nathan Martin**, Iterim CEO, Matterform, UK

Summary Paragraph/Key Points

Dalton McGuinty comes from a family of teachers. His wife, Terri, is a kindergarten teacher, and his brother-in-law, sister-in-law and son-in-law are all teachers. His father was an English professor at the University of Ottawa. As such, it is easy to see the influences that lead to McGuinty's schooling policies when he was premier of Canada's largest province. The "Education Premier" implemented North America's first full-day kindergarten program, hired more teachers, improved test scores and closed the student achievement rate.

"One of the highest callings in life is to be a teacher," McGuinty said. "As human beings we have a primal yearning to make a difference, to live a meaningful life. So we should give high value and status to teachers. As a society, we should recognize and reward teachers because we entrust them to create the best citizens and best workers."

In revamping the education system, McGuinty had one large obstacle to overcome: teachers. Because every government tends to try and impose their vision for schooling, teachers, who see political movements come and go throughout their career, are wary of change. McGuinty understood that he did not actually deliver education, so he had to make it clear that he was walking the walk. He started an award for teachers and offered to pay teachers from high-performing schools extra to move to lower-performing ones to "infect them with excellence." He also offered free professional development training, though he worried about attendance because the workshops took place in the summer during teachers' vacation time and they would not be paid. When 25,000 took advantage of the opportunity, he knew he was making a connection.

"I had to demonstrate I was committed," McGuinty said. "I tried to institute a different model than blame and shame. I am proud of my achievements but also mindful that the world is ever changing."





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McGuinty continues to involve himself in education four years after his stint in government ended. He sits on the board of two Canadian universities and the Canadian University in Dubai. He also serves as an advisor to the education technology company Desire2Learn.

In this age of constant change, students have access to all the content in the world, so technology must be leveraged to complement teaching. “The business, health and agriculture sectors do it, so why not education?” McGuinty asks. He told the story of sitting in on a Grade 10 class in which the teacher walks in and says: “What do you want to learn today?” Someone in the class suggests campaign financing. The teacher says something teachers don’t often say: “I don’t know anything about that.” So the class gets their phones out and starts researching the topic. One student shares something from a newspaper. The teacher asks: “And what bias does that newspaper have? All newspapers have a bias. Your assignment for tomorrow is to tell me what biases different papers have.”

Teachers should try to find ways to become partners with their students. McGuinty learned that the most effective way to get students who had dropped out of school to return was for the teacher to call them and tell them: “I care about you. We will figure out a program for you. Just please come back to school.”

“Empathy is a part of teaching” he said. “My wife, who taught for 30 years, had one four-year-old who misbehaved. She discovered he was being dropped off at seven in the morning then picked up at five at night. So she addressed the situation by hugging him every day. She wanted to give him sense of security. Robots will never be able to do this.”

Takeaway: Governments should recognize the teaching profession is as important as other professions.

