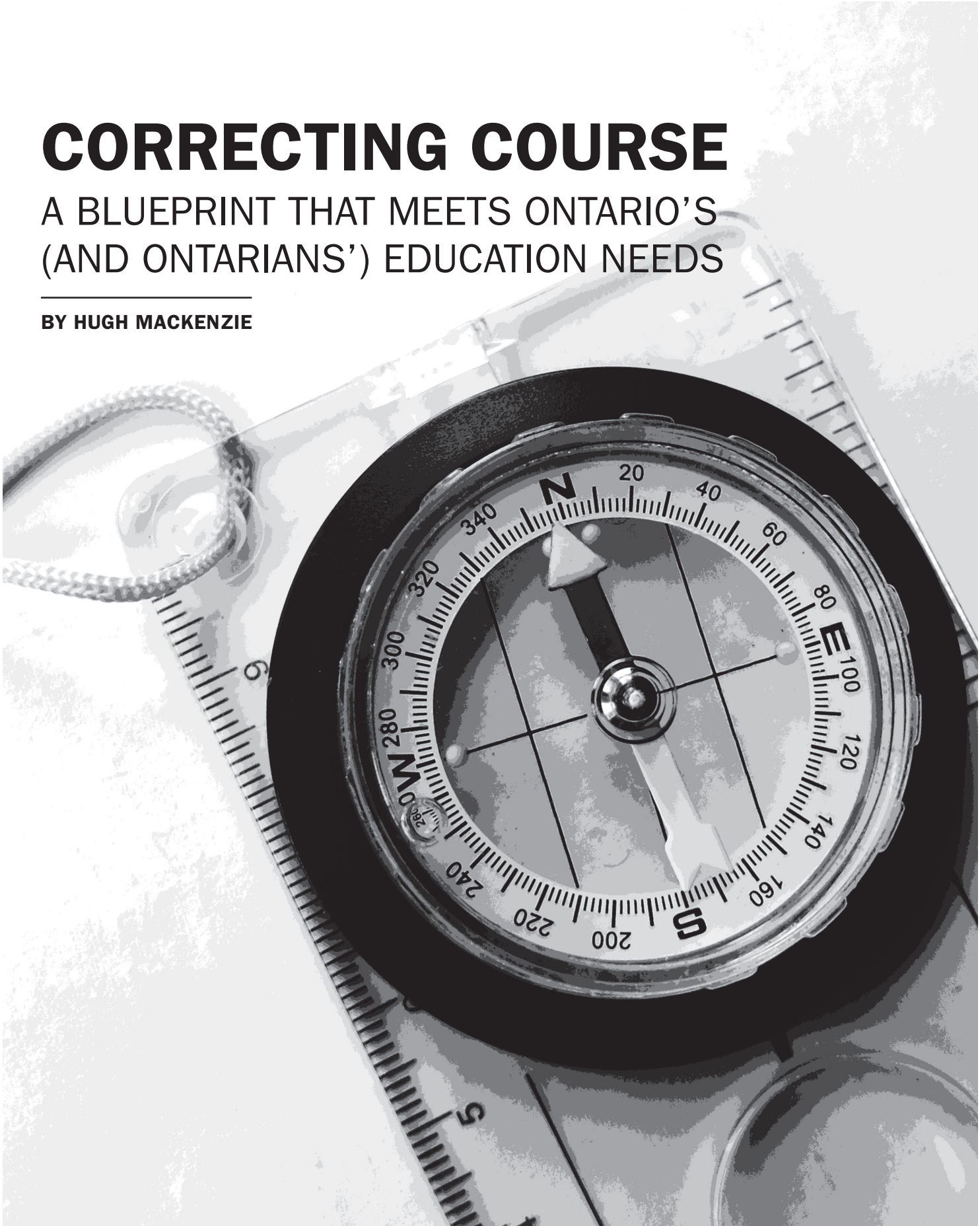


CORRECTING COURSE

A BLUEPRINT THAT MEETS ONTARIO'S
(AND ONTARIANS') EDUCATION NEEDS

BY HUGH MACKENZIE





FALL 2017 MARKED THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FUNDING FORMULA FOR ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ONTARIO, WHICH WAS INTRODUCED IN 1997 AS ONE OF THE SIGNATURE PIECES OF LEGISLATION IN THE FIRST TERM OF THE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT LED BY THEN PREMIER MIKE HARRIS.

FOR THE HARRIS GOVERNMENT, THE CONTROL THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT GAINED IN BILL 160 WAS NOT AN ABSTRACTION. IT WAS CONTROL WITH PURPOSE. AS WAS THE CASE WITH MANY OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES IN ITS FIRST TERM, THE OVERRIDING OBJECTIVE OF EDUCATION FINANCE REFORM WAS TO FREE UP FISCAL CAPACITY FOR ITS CENTRAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN PROMISE: A 30% REDUCTION IN ONTARIO'S PERSONAL INCOME TAX.

IT ALSO SUPPORTED OTHER KEY POLICY GOALS AND PRECONCEPTIONS. BY LIMITING AVAILABLE RESOURCES, IT DROVE THE SYSTEM TOWARDS A NOSTALGIC VISION OF A SIMPLER APPROACH TO EDUCATION DIMLY RECALLED FROM THE 1950S, AND FOCUSED ON THE BASICS OF READING, WRITING AND ARITHMETIC. IT CONSTITUTED A FORCEFUL ARTICULATION OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S LACK OF RESPECT FOR LOCALLY ELECTED SCHOOL BOARDS AND DISTRUST IN THEIR DECISIONS. AND ITS EMPHASIS ON EQUALITY IN FUNDING ADDRESSED THE POLITICALLY IMPORTANT ISSUE OF RESOURCE DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN RURAL

AND URBAN SCHOOL BOARDS AND BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND CATHOLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS.

EVEN AS WE ARE APPROACHING 15 YEARS OF A LIBERAL PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT, REMARKABLY LITTLE HAS CHANGED IN THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE HARRIS GOVERNMENT'S VISION FOR THE FUNDING AND CONTROL OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM. THE REVISED APPROACH TO FUNDING PUBLIC SCHOOLS WAS PREMISED ON AN EDUCATION FUNDING FORMULA THAT WAS FLAWED FROM DAY ONE AND, WHILE SUBSEQUENT GOVERNMENTS MADE MINOR TWEAKS TO THE FORMULA, EDUCATION IN ONTARIO REMAINS WOEFULLY UNDERFUNDED.

THIS IS NOT TO DENY IMPROVEMENTS. REDUCTIONS IN CLASS SIZES IN PRIMARY GRADES, THE PROVISION OF ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR SECONDARY STUDENTS, AND THE INTRODUCTION OF FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN HAVE HAD A MATERIAL POSITIVE IMPACT ON STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

IN OTHER AREAS, NOTHING HAS CHANGED. THE MARGINALIZATION OF SCHOOL BOARDS IN EDUCATION GOVERNANCE HAS EFFECTIVELY BEEN CODIFIED IN THE CURRENT COLLECTIVE BARGAINING REGIME. THE HARRIS GOVERNMENT'S INSISTENCE ON EQUALITY RATHER THAN EQUITY AS THE BASIS FOR FUNDING CONTINUES ESSENTIALLY UNCHANGED. AND WHILE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IS NO LONGER A PRIME SOURCE OF REVENUE FOR TAX CUTS, THE FUNDAMENTAL

FISCAL GAP CREATED BY THE HARRIS GOVERNMENT'S TAX CUTS IN THE FIRST PLACE PERSISTS.

IT'S TIME FOR A NEW FUNDING FORMULA – ONE THAT PRESSES THE RESET BUTTON ON WHAT THE OBJECTIVES OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM SHOULD BE. IT'S TIME TO ARTICULATE A NEW SET OF GOALS FOR ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ONTARIO THAT LAYS OUT A UNIFYING VISION FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS – ONE THAT STARTS BY ASKING: WHAT DOES A SCHOOL NEED IN ORDER TO FULFILL ITS FUNCTION?

NEW OBJECTIVES FOR FUNDING ONTARIO'S EDUCATION SYSTEM SHOULD INCLUDE MORE TRANSPARENT AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY; ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY EDUCATION, NO MATTER WHERE YOU LIVE; GREATER SUPPORT FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS IN SCHOOLS; HEALTHY SCHOOLS THAT ARE THE CENTRE OF THE COMMUNITY; ELIMINATION OF THE SCHOOL MAINTENANCE DEFICITS; ADEQUATE FUNDING TO MEET THESE OBJECTIVES; AND EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION MAKING – THAT IS, REGULAR REVIEWS TO ENSURE THE NEW FUNDING FORMULA IS WORKING TO MEET THESE OBJECTIVES.

IT'S TIME FOR A COURSE CORRECTION. ●

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