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PLANNED DIPLOMA A HIT

By James Wallace
Osprey News Network

A government plan to promote an "alternative" high school diploma that will steer students into a trade is a hit with voters, an SES Research/Osprey News poll has found.

Eight out of ten voters support the Liberal government's proposed diploma which moves classroom emphasis away from pure academics to the ability to develop a skill or trade.

"I think what the poll shows is there's a real appetite for flexibility in our education system," said SES Research president Nik Nanos.

"Average Ontarians see a cookie cutter approach as a thing of the past," he said.

The poll asked voters whether they would support a third type of diploma that focuses on skills training to keep teenagers from dropping out of school.

In response, 58 per cent said they strongly support the idea and 24 per cent are somewhat supportive.

Just nine per cent strongly or somewhat oppose the plan.

Nanos said consumers in general look for flexibility these days and both students and parents know the job market is increasingly competitive.

"People see that the school system is more than just the basics, it's about preparation," he said.

The notion of a trade diploma is not new.

Years ago, Ontario had a well-established network of trade schools where students could take courses in carpentry, drafting and other skilled trades.

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The current Liberal government has undertaken a number of measures over the past two years to curb drop out rates.

Programs range from new “locally developed compulsory courses” to changes to mandatory testing, \$89 million to hire 1,300 new high school teachers and legislation making it mandatory for teens to “keep learning,” in a school, apprenticeship or workplace training program until at least age 18.

The government maintains drop out rates are starting to decline as a result of its initiatives saying number of graduates up to 73 per cent this year from 68 per cent in 2004.

Selling education programs and promised improvements to education was a key plank in the Liberal government's electoral success two years and almost certainly will form of big part of government re-election plans in the 2007 campaign.

If so, the SES Research/Osprey Media poll shows they may get some traction on education.

“I think it would be fair to say that the concept of an alternative diploma that focuses on skills in line with where Ontarians want to see our educational system going,” Nanos said.

Interestingly, Ontarians between 18 and 29 – at 12 per cent – were the most likely to oppose the government plan for an alternative diploma compared to just 6 per cent of those aged 60 or older who thought it was a bad idea.

“Younger Ontarians were comparatively the most likely to oppose, which means maybe they're not into change very much,” Nanos said.

The SES Research telephone poll of 501 Ontario voters was conducted between Oct. 14 and Oct. 17. It is considered accurate to within 4.4 percentage points, 19 times out of 20

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