

We're left asking, 'What happened?'

Students are just getting back to school, so grading hasn't started yet for them. However, the situation is different for Ontario's government.

Premier Dalton McGuinty and his Liberal government have been in power for more than 10 months, and like others in society, Ontario's farmers have been paying close attention to their efforts and the results to date.

Many have raised questions about the government's effectiveness at keeping promises. During the election campaign, Agriculture and Food (OMAF) was described by Dalton McGuinty as a lead ministry if they were elected. At the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, we were looking forward to that promise becoming reality.

After a summer of budget cuts and difficult consultations, we're asking, "What happened?" Perhaps the first clue that this promise was soon to be forgotten was when the government announced the Ministry of Agriculture and Food was being replaced by the Ministry of the Environment for purposes of enforcing the Nutrient Management Act and its regulations.

Even in the face of this change, Ontario farmers and their organization weren't easily discouraged. We continued to seek constructive dialogue with the government through what turned out to be a hectic schedule of consultations — consultations now viewed by some insiders as an attempt to disguise another agenda.

With these issues and a number of other disappointments now behind us, Ontario's farmers, usually generous and forgiving, would be inclined to tell Premier McGuinty and his colleagues they are grading less than satisfactory.

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture believes Ontario's farmers deserve better from their government. After all, much of rural Ontario depends on a successful agricultural economy, and agriculture has long been recognized as the second largest economic driver in the province. What has prompted our fall from favour with the people this province elected last October?

Farmers continue to be the environmental stewards of the bulk of Ontario's lands. This fact became a feature of the recent report from the province's Greenspace Task Force. That report calls for agricultural lands and other remaining green spaces to be preserved for the cultural and recreational use of others in the province.

There's an economic cost to that for farmers. There's also an economic cost to farmers if they find their lands designated

OFA Paul Mistele Commentary

for agriculture use only. Developers would pay much more for those acres than the production of food can return to the farmers in today's economy, so the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) has called on the government for measures to protect the viability of farming for future generations.

We have no assurances from this government that this will happen. There's been no solid indication from government officials that they even recognize the issues the OFA has been communicating to them.

Some of the solutions the OFA and its coalition partners have taken to the minister of agriculture and food, as reason for farmers to comply with the Nutrient Management Act, have been the cost of that compliance being affordable, a demonstrated need for the objectives of that compliance, and a science-based approach in the formation of the regulations.

We're waiting for the OMAF to get back to us with constructive dialogue aimed at moving this issue forward. The uncertainty left in the minds of Ontario's farmers about the Nutrient Management Act and so many other unresolved issues facing farmers is cause for a sub-par grade in this category as well.

The OFA would like to be able to give the province's government a better grade for its treatment of agriculture, but before that can happen, this government must be more open and forthright in its dealings with farmers. The government needs to earn the confidence of farmers.

Paul Mistele is a member of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture executive committee.

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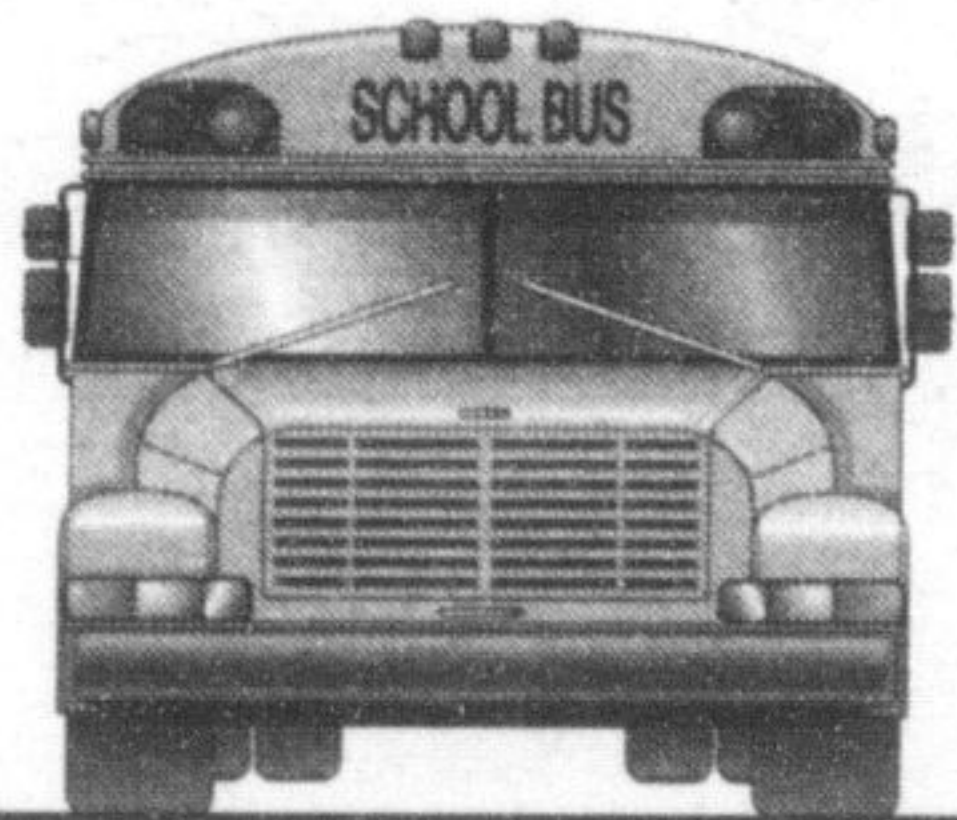
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