

Volunteers before schools: a sign governments are losing sight of what's urgent ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ottawa's clubby arrangement with WE Charity to deliver grants to student volunteers appears odd, but a second look at the whole program makes you realize it is even worse: It is a sign government has lost the plot of the pandemic.

It was, apparently, so important to the pandemic response to ensure that postsecondary students who volunteer their time get a grant of \$1,000 to \$5,000 that the federal government handed the whole operation over to WE, asking it to disburse up to \$900-million, and paying WE by the head.

Sure, the Liberal government has had to rush out emergency supports to individuals and businesses shut down by the pandemic. But grants for students who volunteer aren't an urgent pandemic priority.

Let's not forget this is still a national emergency. At least one massive, crucial step remains: getting people back to work.

So let's compare the rush to give students grants for volunteering with something that hasn't been figured out for many in this country: getting school kids back to class.

Because without schools, a lot of people aren't going back to work, and the economy will suffer. Not to mention, you know, the kids.

Education, of course, is the responsibility of the provinces. And they are doing different things about schools. Quebec has already sent kids back. In Ontario, the plan for September is to send some kids some days and other kids on other days. In other words, parents will have kids at home half the time. That means many can't go back to work.

While Ontario's schools are Premier Doug Ford's jurisdiction, they are also Justin Trudeau's problem: Closed schools mean slower economic recovery and more people on federal benefits.

Mr. Trudeau has told families Ottawa has their backs. So why not put up some money and work with provinces to get physically distanced school classes - and for that matter, a more comprehensive child-care plan - up and running coast to coast for 2020-21?

Without schools being open, said Lauren Dobson-Hughes, a consultant specializing in gender and health issues, parents face an impossible decision as employers ask them to come back. "They can't leave their children at home. So what you will see is women dropping out of the work force," she said. They will bear the burden of how we have decided to reopen.

Schools and child care are the logical, economic and rights-based priority, she said, but nail salons and sushi restaurants are opening first.

Governments are losing track of the mission.

There was a sense of mission about lockdowns in March. Mr. Trudeau's government then made it a mission to pump out temporary financial benefits. But the goal is to bring the economy back. So why the rush to pay student volunteers instead of throwing more at schools and child care?

Maybe it's a nice idea that volunteers get something, but in this event, it's \$10-an-hour, with WE paid for every head it brings in.

Students may be hurt financially by the pandemic, but this isn't proper emergency aid. As it happens, postsecondary students can get emergency benefits of \$1,250 a month, and the government has rolled out hundreds of millions of dollars for pandemic work placements and job programs; \$900-million for volunteers is just not a pandemic priority. Yet the Liberal government decided the rush was so desperate that it had to use WE - an organization that highlights Mr. Trudeau and his wife, Sophie Grégoire Trudeau, as spokespersons - to shovel out money.

Mr. Trudeau insisted that idea came from the civil service, which seems strangely unlike civil servants. Ottawa bureaucrats aren't known for going out on a limb to propose that a massive program be handed over to an organization that has never done anything like it before.

Never mind that the idea of paying people to recruit people who will be paid to work for organizations that don't have to pay them is

systemically vulnerable to fraud.

It all requires more explanation - and still, the government says it will not make the agreement with WE public until the fall.

The bigger worry is that it is making this a priority in a crisis, when many kids won't get to school in the fall, and the steps to reopening remain uncertain.

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