

Liberals woo parents [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Ontario Liberals are promising to extend kindergarten to a full day, and to give \$300 a year to all university and college undergraduates for textbooks and computers, sources say.

Premier Dalton McGuinty is to unveil the measures at a Toronto hotel this morning as part of the Liberal election platform for the Oct. 10 election.

The \$400 million full-day kindergarten plan would enable parents to save child-care costs.

McGuinty will promise to appoint a new "early learning adviser" to tell the government how to implement universal full-day pre-school before the end of its second mandate in 2011.

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The kindergarten plan would begin in either the fall of 2009 or 2010 with full-day senior kindergarten for 5-year-olds, and would be expanded to junior kindergarten for 4-year-olds the following year.

In effect, it's full-day kindergarten, but the Liberals, mindful of the concerns of teachers' unions, have dubbed it "a full-day pre-school program," so daycare workers with two-year college diplomas in early childhood education could work in the classroom along with teachers.

If it were considered full-day kindergarten, only teachers could provide instruction, insiders say.

Early childhood education workers would complement teachers and if there is a space crunch in schools, the program could be offered at a daycare centre. (This is already happening in some parts of Toronto.)

The province currently spends about \$1 billion annually on half-day junior and senior kindergarten, but expanding it to a full day would not mean doubling the cost, sources say.

Education experts say the \$400 million being earmarked for the extension would be more than enough to pay for this given that the infrastructure for kindergarten already exists in the school system.

Across Ontario, it would affect 124,000 5-year-olds and 110,000 4-year olds.

By going to full-day pre-school, the province would free up daycare subsidies and spaces for other age groups, including school-age programs and infants and toddlers.

Universal full-day kindergarten would free up 44,175 licensed daycare spaces & including 18,000 subsidized spaces & for 4-year-olds and 40,105 licensed spaces & including 16,000 subsidized spots & for 5-year-olds.

Since they are only half-day spaces now, it's the equivalent to about 42,000 full-day spaces and 17,000 full-day subsidies that will be available to younger children.

The Liberals expect this will be attractive for young parents struggling to find and pay for decent child care. Instead of paying for half-days, they would only have to find after-school care, which is considerably less expensive.

The policy would also help to stabilize the daycare workforce because recent studies have shown that early-childhood educators are leaving the profession in droves due to a lack of career opportunities and low pay.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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