

# What happened to pre-school program? [CA-ON] <sup>[1]</sup>

Editorial

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## AVAILABILITY

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### EXCERPTS:

Three years ago, the phrase "Early Years" entered Ontario's political vocabulary.

It came from Dr. Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain who produced a highly progressive study on the needs of children from birth to kindergarten.

It recommended a universal pre-school program that would better equip all kids for school and for a healthier, more successful life.

Premier Mike Harris, who commissioned the study - mainly as a response to the ambitious "First Steps" program proposed earlier by Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty - embraced its rhetoric like a true believer.

The substance was a different story.

Soon after the Mustard-McCain report, Harris announced an Early Years Challenge Fund of \$30 million to match community donations.

The \$30 million has been announced regularly ever since. In June alone, there were six announcements of "early years steering committees" around the province.

How much of the money has gone to kids? Very little. How much has gone to meeting the goals set out in the Early Years Study? Almost nothing.

The "steering committee" press releases of June provide a clue as to what has happened. The fund now has 37 early years co-ordinators paid \$40,000 a year plus, 37 steering committees of 10 members each and an Early Years Advisory Board, all appointed by the Harris cabinet.

But the real power in all this empire building is Barbara Minogue. She's a special assistant to the Premier for children. She was also his campaign manager and she and her husband, Peter, are among Harris' best friends and golfing buddies.

The elaborate political apparatus of the Early Years Fund is one of her trademarks. She did the same thing to the Trillium Foundation after Harris purged its widely respected executives.

Communities, as a result, have little to say about Early Years projects. The projects approved so far have more to do with the government's political vulnerabilities and interests than any coherent program.

For example, there's a \$2 million grant to the Dairy Farmers of Ontario to expand the elementary school milk program. The milk is no doubt good for elementary schoolchildren and the \$2 million is very, very good for the dairy farmers. But Early Years was supposed to be about pre-kindergarten children, not elementary pupils.

Emptied of substance, transformed from an important policy into just another political operation, the Early Years Challenge Fund is also being emptied of provincial funding.

In May the province announced that \$15.4 million in federal money was going into the fund. But total spending stayed the same so the announcement really said \$14.6 million in provincial money is coming out.

The fund has become, in other words, a tawdry piece of political deceit. It is also a tragedy in the making.

The industrial countries with which Canada competes - as represented by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development - decided in June that early childhood education is so important that one per cent of gross domestic product should be spent on it. In Ontario's case, that's roughly \$4 billion a year, a quarter of what's spent now on education from kindergarten to grad school.

Instead of a significant move toward this, we've been given rhetoric without substance, puffery without funding and jobs for political friends.

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**Region:** Ontario <sup>[2]</sup>

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