

Tory panel urges daycare plan [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Governments should invest more than \$1-billion to provide nearly universal daycare and full-day junior and senior kindergarten in Ontario, a Conservative-appointed agency urged in a report released yesterday.

The Education Improvement Commission called for "a bold move" to improve the lot of children in their early years. The report also stressed the need for an end to the labour disputes between teacher unions and the Ontario government to foster a more positive learning environment.

"If this situation isn't resolved soon, it will inevitably lead to lower achievement and more dropouts," wrote Dave Cooke, a former NDP education minister, and Anne Vanstone, one-time Toronto school board chairwoman, the commission's two co-chairs.

But Mike Harris, the Ontario Premier, was noncommittal yesterday about implementing the recommendations. "We've just received this report and we certainly are committed to ensuring that we do a lot more in the early years," said Mr. Harris, who told reporters the province has received "conflicting advice" on how it can do more for children during their early years.

"We'll look at the report, but I can tell you that over the next five to seven years, I think \$1-billion is low. We have added close to \$500-million this year in the areas of early-childhood [education], head-start, lower class sizes, including the provision of kindergarten, junior kindergarten [and the] expansion of child-care opportunities," he said.

The Premier's comments came after the release of the final report of the commission he struck three years ago to oversee the restructuring of Ontario's school boards.

Titled *The Road Ahead V: A Report on Improving Student Achievement*, the report makes several broad recommendations, including providing provincial funding for all-day junior and senior kindergarten within seven years, so that "children start school ready to learn."

The Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario applauded the idea, but Mr. Harris and Janet Ecker, Ontario's Minister of Education, would say only that the report will be considered.

The Ontario government currently pays for half-day kindergarten. The commission estimates it would cost \$750-million to provide for all-day kindergarten, money that would be partially recouped by the phase-out of Grade 13.

Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick already provide all-day kindergarten for five-year-olds.

British Columbia provides full-day kindergarten for children with special needs, those learning English as a second language and those entitled to enhanced aboriginal education. In the 1999/2000 school year, the province spent \$11.9-million on all-day kindergarten for 2,980 students who qualified and \$78.6-million on half-day kindergarten for the rest of its students.

Support for all-day kindergarten is also growing. This fall, parents in West Vancouver began paying \$350 a month for B.C.'s first "user-pay" kindergartens to keep their children in school all day.

Alberta and Prince Edward Island both expanded their kindergarten programs this fall. Alberta's school authorities received an extra \$45-million to extend kindergarten from four half-days to five half-days a week for 42,000 students. Funding increases in the province will continue until 2002.

Prince Edward Island started a three-year pilot program for its first provincially funded kindergarten programs this fall, providing half-day instruction.

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