

Harris making no promises on universal daycare [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Mike Harris, the Ontario Premier, was noncommittal yesterday about implementing the Education Improvement Commission's recommendation to spend more than \$1-billion on all-day kindergarten and universal daycare.

"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 "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 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 imminent 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.

Prince Edward Island started a three-year pilot program for its first provincially funded kindergarten programs this fall, providing half-day instruction for approximately 1,800 five-year-olds.

The Ontario commission's report also stressed the need for an end to the labour disputes between teacher unions and the province.

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Region: Ontario ^[2]

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