

Big promises, little cash for Ontario's kids [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The showmanship was impressive. The substance was disappointing.

"I am announcing today the creation of Ontario's Promise - the Partnership for Ontario's Children and Youth," Premier Mike Harris declared Friday. "Ontario's Promise is a call to action, a cause, a partnership. A partnership whose goal is to leave no child behind."

Retired U.S. general Colin Powell gave an inspirational speech. Film star Dan Ackroyd lent his name to the initiative. Choirs from Toronto's public schools sang. Several large corporations ponied up money.

Ontario's contribution: \$2 million.

That amounts to \$3.72 for each of the 537,000 children living in poverty in the province.

This follows an all-too-familiar pattern.

It began two years ago, when Harris conscripted one of the country's top medical researchers, Fraser Mustard, to advise him on early childhood development.

Mustard prepared a ground-breaking report, calling on the government to spearhead the development of a network of preschool learning centres across the province. Every toddler, regardless of family income, should be stimulated and nurtured, he said.

Harris welcomed the report with great fanfare.

Ontario's contribution: \$30 million - with strings attached.

To qualify for provincial funds, a preschool program had to raise half the money it needed from private sources. So far none has. So Queen's Park is still sitting on the money.

Mustard also urged the province to change the Employment Standards Act to allow a parent a year's leave to bond with a newborn. Ottawa was willing to extend maternity benefits.

But Harris refused to change the provincial legislation. "It has not been identified to me as a high priority," he said.

The Premier talks a good show. His actions tell a different story.

He has chopped social assistance to the province's poorest families. He has forced single mothers to work, without providing affordable child care. He has cancelled the construction of subsidized housing.

Ontario's kids don't need a glitzy corporate fundraising campaign. They need a government that leads by example.

-Reprinted from The Toronto Star.

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