

All talk, no action on early learning [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Premier Mike Harris made so much of a "progress report and consultation paper" called Ontario's Children, Ontario's Future that he gave it to other premiers.

But the report doesn't detail progress. It documents a year and a half of aimless meandering through studies, committees and the obscure byways of bureaucracy - while the children wait.

Harris, for example, promised \$30 million more than a year ago to match private donations to set up Early Years learning programs for children under the age of 4.

His re-election platform, the so-called Blueprint, promised to combine and expand a number of existing programs "under one umbrella, The Early Years Program, with increased funding."

Last May's budget repeated the \$30 million promise - though not the promise of expanded funding - and to build "on the success of the five demonstration projects we launched last year."

And now what's happening?

Harris' "progress" report declares that "the Ontario government has shown leadership through ... a commitment of up to \$15 million this year." Strange. We thought he said \$30 million.

As for the demonstration projects, the government didn't actually launch them - they were humming along and working fine when Harris hopped aboard. Another 13 projects weren't so lucky - Harris cancelled them after he came to power in 1995.

And what have they demonstrated? Patience, now. "Results from the five Early Years Demonstration communities are expected in the fall of 2000."

Meanwhile, the government - a year and a half after committing to early learning - has announced a warm-and-fuzzy "consultation." It asks such hard-edged questions as "how can communities unleash the spirit of voluntarism to help all children gain the early child development support they require?"

And how long will it take to find out that the answer is not another consultation? This is not progress. This is procrastination.

Meanwhile, what is happening in the real world, the one children and working parents live in?

Well, in Toronto more than 40,000 children are on waiting lists for subsidized housing.

Affordable day care is disappearing. This is mainly of provincial doing - Harris' school funding formula forces school boards out of day care. They can't replace playgrounds torn down for safety reasons either.

Social assistance was cut 21.6 per cent in 1995, of course, and Byzantine rules designed to keep people off welfare are hitting hardest at single parents. At least one child in five lives with a single parent.

The Star believes a solid, universal Early Years program is vital. But while we wait for it, shouldn't we get on with life?

Shouldn't we put some money into restoring affordable day care, for example, so that single parents can leave their children someplace safe while they try to earn a living?

Whatever happens to early learning, in other words, isn't any Children's Agenda - local, provincial or federal - going to have to provide more child care? If it is intended to help children, that is.

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