

Premier's chance to show leadership [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As provincial budget day nears, anti-poverty activists find themselves facing a frustrating new obstacle.

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This winter's precipitous drop in provincial revenues couldn't have come at worse time for anti-poverty activists. After fighting for five years to convince McGuinty to tackle Ontario's social deficit, they felt the ground shift. The premier's poverty-reduction plan, unveiled in December, was suddenly fluid.

By March, McGuinty was lowering expectations, signalling that although he remained committed to poverty reduction, the government might have to take selective action and postpone parts of the plan. Last Friday, in a pre-budget announcement, the premier did exactly that.

He pledged to raise the Ontario Child Benefit by \$42 a month a month in July (it was scheduled to go up by \$17), but dampened hopes of any early increase in welfare incomes or expansion of affordable child care. Anti-poverty activists understand that resources are limited.

They know the deficit is ballooning, entire industries are collapsing and many Ontarians are worried about their jobs, their pensions, their homes and their kids' future. But they insist that helping the neediest still makes moral and economic sense

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By investing in early learning, the government would reduce the risk that Ontario's next generation will be permanently scarred by a cyclical economic slump. When the recession abates, the province will need all the talent and resources it can muster to rebuild its aging industrial economy.

It won't be able to afford to divert an increasing portion of public funds into social assistance, law enforcement and criminal justice. By honouring his commitment to improve the lives of the province's poorest citizens despite straitened circumstances, McGuinty could demonstrate moral leadership and bolster the values that once defined Ontario.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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