

Parents shouldn't have to settle [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Few are calling it universal day care, and that is probably a good thing. Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty's plan to introduce full-day kindergarten into Ontario schools, and then some, is already getting enough pushback from critics. If the D-word was invoked, the debate would certainly turn ugly.

But that doesn't change the fact that the ambitious plan to turn schools into "continuum(s) of early learning, child care and family supports for children," -- all-day, all-year learning hubs -- is the closest we have come in this province to universal day care. And it is being introduced in way that makes a great deal of sense, by building on the school system, something we already have, rather than starting from scratch.

Long-time day-care advocates should be celebrating, but quietly. Universal day care is a political hot potato in this country. Bail out a badly run and outdated car company and people will shrug their shoulders. Try to build a system in which all children have access to good-quality care, and an equal start in life, and wait for the howls of outrage.

Still, the announcement couldn't come at a better time.

Child care in Ontario and around the country has been aptly described as a "chaotic mess." Parents piece together preschool care, after school care and summer care, with results that vary dramatically. Trying to deal with half-day kindergarten is a particular nightmare for many working parents.

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Ontario's plan, unveiled this week, recognizes that most Ontario children are in care, and often it is inadequate. It also recognizes that there is a large and growing school-readiness gap. Thirdly, it recognizes that parents would like to spend more time with their young children before returning to work, if possible.

In Ontario, as in most provinces, we study and tweak and worry over our education system, convinced that children arrive at school as blank slates, equally ready to learn, and all we have to do is test them enough to make sure everyone thrives.

That is far from the truth, as early childhood experts, and common sense, have been telling us for some time. Twenty seven per cent of Ontario six year olds, according to Dr. Charles Pascal, the child-care expert who wrote the Early Learning Report the province's plan is based on, enter Grade 1 with significant learning deficits compared to their peers. Many will never be able to close the gap and will struggle, as a result, with higher rates of poverty and crime. Compared to other wealthy nations, Canada is ranked near the bottom when it comes to early learning.

Pascal calls it "an economic stimulus plan that will keep on giving. The economic return on investment is not a fairy tale." Pascal is right, it is economic stimulus, one that will pay back by helping Ontario children achieve their potential. The cost, \$500 million now and more later, is an investment with a future. Which is more than you can say about auto bailouts.

The plan has its critics, notably teachers, some of whom are considering taking the province to court. And it is not clear how soon the other key recommendations in Pascal's report -- school-based care for preschool children and extended maternity leave for parents so that they can stay home for the first 18 months of their child's life -- will be in place or how many complications will need to be worked out.

But it is a start. It is the right thing to do. And it is about time.

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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