

Teachers and early educators can be classroom partners ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In 2001, a 20-country, landmark report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identified a "strong and equal partnership" between schools and early childhood education and care as a key success marker in programs for young children. The study found that "the diverse perspectives and methods of both" were strengthened by working together.

Charles Pascal clearly had the OECD's conclusions in mind when he advised Premier Dalton McGuinty to rethink the way Ontario delivers programs for young children. Pascal's own independent review of early education systems found that the most effective of them combined kindergarten and early childhood education (ECE) at both the government and classroom level. He wants our province to follow their lead.

But as Ontario prepares to reform its messy patchwork of early childhood services and launch Canada's first universal, full-day early learning program for 4- and 5-year-olds, the federation representing the province's public elementary teachers has mounted a campaign to "keep teachers in kindergarten classrooms and to protect the integrity of the teaching profession" instead of the teacher-early childhood educator team proposed by Pascal.

Bringing the expertise of teachers together with the child development knowledge of early childhood educators is central to the new program. If this doesn't come about, the plan to transform elementary schools into welcoming year-round neighbourhood centres for children and families will fall apart.

Pascal has been clear, he is not touting ECEs because they cost less. He wants them to be part of schools because they have training to work with young children and their families that no one else has.

Ontario does not require specialized early childhood qualifications for kindergarten teachers; and while many have voluntarily upgraded their qualifications, two-thirds have no specific training on how 4- and 5-year-olds develop and learn.

This is not in the best interests of children. The OECD observed that the practice in most Canadian kindergartens "tends for the most part to be rather conventional. Many kindergarten teachers ... are not trained to work with younger children. ... Sometimes children seem bored or disoriented."

Pascal makes several recommendations about staffing the new early learning and care program. In the shorter term - since the supply of early childhood specialist teachers is limited - certified teachers and registered ECEs would work as a team throughout the day with 4- and 5-year-olds. In the mid-term, kindergarten teachers will take additional courses. In the future, educators working with young children will have early childhood specialty degrees.

As it's become clear that knowledge about child development influences beliefs, attitudes and practices of teachers, a specialized degree is becoming the new benchmark for educator qualifications. A recent report on full-day kindergarten by the Education Commission of the States, a U.S. education group, recommends that kindergarten teachers "should be expected to have certification or ongoing professional development in early childhood education."

UNICEF's benchmarks for quality early childhood provision state that "at least 50 per cent of staff in early education centres (3- to 5-year-olds) ... should have a minimum of three years tertiary education with recognized qualifications in early childhood studies or a related field."

The prestigious National Institute for Early Education Research's benchmarks for quality early childhood programs specify both early childhood specialization and degree-length training. And research indicates that when early educators work together in a non-hierarchical structure, quality is higher.

A college-level early childhood diploma provides ECEs with a solid grounding in child development, curriculum planning specific to young children and the value of working in partnership with families. A four-year, early childhood education degree (such as Ryerson's School of Early Childhood Education) can offer the depth and breadth of understanding of children from birth to age 8, and curriculum in literacy, numeracy, arts and science that accommodates all learners.

These graduates exemplify the kind of early childhood specialist that Pascal proposes. They will be able to work collaboratively in the community with families and other professionals to ensure continuity in the care and education of children from the early years to the primary years.

Solid, strong and equal partnerships to ensure the best start for the new full-day early learning program - and the best start for children -

can be forged by registered early childhood educators collaborating with teachers with education credentials.

This is an enormous opportunity for Ontario to "get it right" by using the best available knowledge about staffing an innovative early learning program enriched by the very best of both professions.

In developing a strong and equal partnership between teachers and early childhood educators we can accomplish something truly great in Canadian education.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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