

More views on early childhood education ^[1]

Letters to the editor

Author: various

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EXCERPTS

Thanks to Rachel Langford for her excellent, informative article. As a retired kindergarten/primary teacher of 35 years I congratulate and agree with Mr. Pascal's proposal for young children.

The OECD noted, "Many kindergarten teachers are not trained to work with younger children." I have observed, through the years, teachers landing on kindergarten steps with no specific training on how 4- and 5-year-olds develop. Pity the 4-year-old who is made to sit at a desk for prolonged periods of time to colour stencils and be quiet.

We can't wait for our children to walk and talk, then we turn around and tell them to sit down and be quiet. Then school environment for these little folks should and must be play-based. Stories, music, songs, free play and outdoor exercise must be valued. Play is so important as it develops social, emotional and intellectual skills, but, in some kindergartens and schools, play seems to be a dirty word. Children do learn by playing.

I am wondering why teachers are opposing this proposed plan. Are they not confident with their programs? Not willing to share their classrooms? Not wanting to upgrade their knowledge of child development by taking additional courses? I believe two heads are better than one and learning from one another can be invaluable experiences.

I know there are many excellent kindergarten teachers.

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"Let's get it right."

Diane Lalonde, Aurora

Being concerned about the integrity of their profession by "allowing" ECEs into the classroom, the Elementary Teachers Union has called into question the integrity of the profession I am proud to say I have been apart of for almost 20 years. We are a group who are continually put down. I say no more.

I have been trained specifically and graduated from Conestoga College to work with children from birth to age 6. Can any teacher claim the same?

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I strongly feel that teachers need to reevaluate their true reasons for not allowing outsiders in to "their" schools. What is more important, the children or the union?

Lisa Weidner, Hanover

I am a parent who has had the privilege of enrolling my child in a full-day early learning program. The program is staffed with a team of ECEs and a school board provided teacher. I chose the program mostly for convenience to facilitate my work-life balance issues. I am confident that once I drop my daughter off, I have peace of mind that makes it easier for me to do my job without distractions.

I have seen too many friends that have to piece together their work, child care and school arrangements and all the time worrying that connections will not go wrong. As for the learning outcomes that benefit my child, the seamlessness of the day allows her to be a calmer child and a happy and confident learner.

I agree with the position of Rachel Langford that this is an opportunity for the government to give our children more than they have now and that teachers should embrace this moment in support of children and families. Of course it will take change, time and money but it needs to start somewhere, it needs to start now.

Ilyana Browne, Toronto

I am committed to working with the government, parents and community stakeholders to ensure that the best possible educational program is put in place for the benefit of all our children. But I will not hesitate to promote the importance of certified teachers in kindergarten.

When Premier Dalton McGuinty campaigned for re-election in 2007 he promised Ontario parents "full-day kindergarten." Perhaps Mr. McGuinty was being casual in his use of words or perhaps he knew, as polls show, that parents and the general public overwhelmingly favour a full-day kindergarten program taught by a certified teacher.

ETFO values the training and skills of early childhood educators. But the government must recognize that teachers have the qualifications, knowledge and professional skills to deliver the program.

Every existing full-day kindergarten program in the province - and there are many - is taught by a certified teacher. ETFO members who are kindergarten teachers tell us they need and want more time in the classroom to help their young students learn. Ontario should take advantage of their knowledge in developing its new program.

Many studies underscore the importance of having qualified teachers in the kindergarten classroom. Kindergarten teachers understand the curriculum and how what happens in kindergarten is linked to the learning in later primary grades. European countries, New Zealand, and the U.S. have all acknowledged the importance of university-trained teachers in these settings. The government of Prince Edward Island's commission on kindergarten has agreed, recommending that early childhood educators acquire teaching credentials over a number of years.

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The expansion of Ontario's education system to include a full-day kindergarten program for 4- and 5-year-olds is long overdue. ETFO is committed to making sure the best possible program is established.

Sam Hammond, President, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, Toronto

You can only agree with Rachel Langford if you have in mind the well being of our children, creating a foundation for exceptional education and developing individuals who, unlike teachers federation members, want to belong to the community at large. I always regarded university education as a venue to open people's minds, develop creative thinking and out-of-box attitude.

All our school teachers are university educated yet the people who represent them still insist on creating an exclusive feeling about the profession. They reinforce the notion that the teacher knows better, that she is superior to others and certainly holds a higher status than anybody else. This might be true with some individuals but may not be generalized to people who worked in the kindergarten class with very young children and never had ECE training.

This training gives solid knowledge not only about child development and learning but also about mundane aspects of a child's life that the school does not acknowledge, such as bed wetting, missed breakfast or night terrors. This knowledge allows ECE teachers to connect with parents better by staying on the same level of understanding and caring.

ECE creates equality between school and family, brings common sense to a child's education and encourages dialogue. As much as we care about individual needs, we make sure that they are well accommodated within the context of community.

It is time for the teachers federation to think about society and its little members. ECE teachers will not consume the entire pie of wealth and they will share the pieces with everybody with an open mind and a caring attitude that is so teacher-like.

Bozena Stepien, RECE, Toronto

Two of the best years of my 28-year teaching career were when, as a kindergarten teacher, I had an ECE working with me in my classroom. We were the team chosen to be the educators in a North York School Board pilot project to develop a co-ordinated child care/kindergarten program.

It was an exceptional time of learning from each other and enabling students to benefit from the co-ordination of our efforts both in the classroom and the in-school daycare.

I am very disappointed that the Elementary Teachers Federation does not see the benefits of such team work. Not all kindergarten teachers have additional early childhood education courses on their résumé. Faculties of education have not put particular focus on kindergarten in their Primary/Junior BEd program. In my BEd year, I requested a student placement in a kindergarten classroom but my request was denied.

It is only when teachers and early educators can be classroom partners that kindergarten students will be enriched by the best of both professions.

Catherine Ambrose, Mississauga

Rachel Langford's article on Ontario's early learning program is right on the mark. Speaking as an early childhood educator who has completed a two-year ECE diploma and is one course away from completing an ECE degree, I can attest to the readiness of people in my field to work as equal partners with teachers in creating high-quality programming for 4- and 5-year-olds. Dr. Langford is right that the Pascal plan offers an enormous opportunity for Ontario to "get it right," but only if we can all pull together and focus on moving forward.

Bernadette Summers, Toronto

What is particularly exciting about Dr. Pascal's vision is that it describes a world where different levels of government and different systems work together. Integration, interconnection, co-operation and partnerships will all be supported in this new world. Parents will be able to find a range of support in their local school or in the Child and Family Centre; children will get a combination of teaching and early childhood education; professionals will work together; and policy decisions will be based on an overall vision for children up to 12 years of age - as opposed to the mishmash of policy and programs we have right now.

We are suffering these days from a surfeit of divisions in our public policies. It makes one want to remind policy-makers and professionals in various fields that ultimately "the knee bone is connected to the thigh bone."

It is not necessarily going to be easy to make all the necessary changes, and there will be many bumps as we overcome all of the barriers to co-operation and integration. But let's remember who we're doing it for. Neither children, nor their families come neatly divided into different systems. And children need people and structures in their lives that support all of their needs - educational, developmental, social etc.

My wish is that Premier McGuinty embraces this new (and nearly revolutionary) concept as his legacy. He will leave a new, innovative program for early learning - better than anything in any other province - and it will be anchored in a system of community schools and Child and Family Centres across the province.

The recommendations in the report are truly visionary; they will make life better for all children and families and they will make us all proud to be from a province with such vision and foresight.

Annie Kidder, Executive Director, People for Education

Rachel Langford comments that the recent report on early learning is an "enormous opportunity to get it right" and provide our children with high quality early learning. However, she focused only on the part of the program that deals with full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-old children.

Other recommendations include offering parents a one-stop opportunity for licenced child care and home child care, family resource programs and help for children with special needs. Funding from children who are in the full-day learning program will move to children from infants to 4 years old and can be used to lower parent fees, raise wages of child care staff and expand access.

The report proposes affordable after-school and summer programs for children from 6 to 12. If the McGuinty government is going to really get it right, then they need to commit to funding and implementing the whole report so that all children from infants to 12 years old benefit from high quality early education.

Andrea Calver, Co-ordinator, Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care

The behaviour of Ontario's elementary teachers union in opposing the participation of early childhood educators (ECEs) in the early learning system, as recommended by the Pascal Report, is illustrative of the fact that sisterhood is not global. Elementary teachers and ECEs are predominantly women and one would expect the former to grasp this opportunity to bring their relatively disprivileged, but qualified sisters into the educational system.

I have no other option but to question the commitment of the elementary teachers to social justice. Apparently, solidarity between women as workers stops at the border of income differentiation or "class" differences.

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In my judgment, it looks like the mere acquisition of bachelor of education degrees or certification as elementary teachers gives the false belief to their holders that they can teach or meet the developmental needs of children of any age.

In the major metropolitan areas of Ontario, many racialized women work as ECEs and that is not the reality with respect to the demographic make-up of elementary teachers. If ECEs are blended into the educational system, this act would go a long way toward improving the wages, benefits and professional development opportunities of these workers.

If it takes a village to raise a child, why is it that the elementary teachers' union is trying to keep out the ECEs from this collective responsibility?

Ajamu Nangwaya, Toronto

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