

Act on full day learning ^[1]

Editorial

Author: Toronto Star

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EXCERPTS

When Premier Dalton McGuinty committed to full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-olds he painted a compelling vision: An integrated system to "help our kids succeed in school down the road, save families time and money and free up thousands of licensed child care spaces."

This summer, his early learning adviser followed up on that ambitious pledge with a comprehensive plan to turn our schools into community hubs for families, boost half-day kindergarten to a full-day program, and address daycare shortages and affordability.

Unfortunately, there are worrying signs that McGuinty will use the economy as an excuse to slowly implement the school day piece of Charles Pascal's report and ignore the rest.

That risks undermining the broader goal of giving all our kids the best possible start in life and providing the co-ordinated services modern families need. It could also damage our already unstable and underfunded daycare sector - leaving some parents with fewer options and higher costs than before.

Daycare budgets rely on the money they get for kindergarten and school age kids to help offset the high cost of care for younger children. If all the province does is put 4- and 5-year-olds in school from 9 to 3, it will leave daycares so starved for cash that some will close or dramatically increase the already high cost of their programs.

Such a scenario would certainly not meet McGuinty's stated plan to "save families time and money and free up thousands of licensed child care spaces."

The Pascal report calls on a range of government departments, including education, children's services and finance, to work together. That is difficult at the best of times, let alone during a time of provincial deficits.

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McGuinty has said the rollout of full-day learning will begin in September 2010. That means registration would begin in January.

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How many schools will get the full-day program in the first year? Who will be at the front of the class? Will it be a blend of kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators - as Pascal recommended - or will the government bow to pressure from teachers' unions and come up with something else?

Educators and municipalities that oversee daycares are expecting the province to answer these questions in the coming weeks. Notwithstanding current economic pressures, Ontarians have every right to expect that when the responses do come, McGuinty will have stayed true to his original pledge.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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