

There's a lot to learn from the new education system ^[1]

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Source: Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 21 Sep 2009

EXCERPTS

It is a safe bet that next September, on the day after Labour Day, Dalton McGuinty will pose at an Ontario school as it begins to offer a full day of classes for four- and five-year-olds.

What remains to be seen is how many other schools will be doing likewise, and whether any of them will look much like what was proposed in Charles Pascal's government-commissioned report earlier this year.

As Mr. McGuinty's government prepares to unveil its plans for early childhood education, likely next month, its central challenge is to balance quality with expedience. The \$200-million it has allotted for early learning investments in 2010-11, and the \$300-million in 2011-12, will go only so far. The question the government is forced to confront is whether to aim high at a small number of schools, or aim lower and cover more ground.

The signs out of Queen's Park are that it will be more the former than the latter. Many parents, who were promised before the 2007 provincial election that full-day kindergarten was on its way, will grow antsy if it is available in only a very small number of schools three years later. But most government officials argue that it is better to move slowly and get it right. If even one-third of elementary schools have full-day learning the year after next, it will come as a surprise.

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But if the government takes Dr. Pascal's recommendations seriously - and most officials and advisers speak glowingly of his work - there is only so much room for cherry-picking. Take some of his proposals out, and the whole model collapses.

The most obvious example of this is the extended school day, in which parents would be able to drop their kids off as early as 7:30 a.m., and pick them up as late as 6 p.m., secure in the knowledge that they will be spending their time productively. It will be a while before these services are available for children up to the age of 12, as Dr. Pascal proposes. But the government seems to be leaning toward providing them for four- and five-year-olds off the bat, to avoid parents concluding that shuttling kids between school and daycare is even more of a hassle than their pre-existing child care arrangements.

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At some point, the government will need to ramp up its spending commitment, or else some of today's toddlers may have children of their own before their schools have been expanded. But for future generations, a gradual phase-in may prove a blessing, since there is a strong element of trial-by-error to all this. Over the next few years, officials will be taking notes on everything from cost containment to curriculum to the allocation of human resources, and attempting to learn from their mistakes - of which, given the scramble to be ready for next year, there will probably be a good number.

Equally uncertain, until the phase-in has begun, will be the ripple effects. A particular concern among government officials is what effect full-day learning will have on private daycare services. If most of the four- and five-year-olds in an area are pulled out, will some of those centres be forced out of business, leaving children three and under stranded?

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- reprinted from The Globe and Mail

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