

Don't lose focus on early learning ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

In Canada, about three-quarters of women with a child under age 6 are in the paid workforce. Yet there are regulated daycare spaces for only 20 per cent of those children, according to a report released last week by a national child care policy research institute.

This explains why a group of high-profile advocates were at Queen's Park yesterday urging Premier Dalton McGuinty to implement a report by Charles Pascal, former deputy minister of education. The report went beyond just recommending all-day kindergarten - as the Liberals promised in the last provincial election campaign - and called for a "seamless day," with integrated care both before and after school for children age 4 to 12.

As reported this week by the Star's Kristin Rushowy, there are growing indications that McGuinty is about to give in to pressure from the teachers' unions, which say certified teachers must be at the front of the class for the entire school portion of the day. That would drive up the costs of the school program for 4- and 5-year-olds. In turn, that could leave insufficient funding for the expansion and improved affordability of daycare, not to mention the broader goal of replacing a patchwork of programs with a seamless system where schools act as community hubs catering to the needs of modern families.

More than 120 prominent citizens, including former premier Bill Davis and early childhood expert Fraser Mustard, have signed a letter urging McGuinty to focus on the big picture and "do it right." They argue that the Pascal report recommendations are "interdependent parts for wholesale positive change." They're right.

Adopting just one or two pieces - such as implementing full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-olds, with integrated before- and after-school care for these students only - would perpetuate an inefficient, fragmented system.

...

It is understandable, given the fiscal situation today, that McGuinty is leery of big ideas with high price tags.

But there is a huge economic upside if our children arrive in Grade 1 better prepared and parents are able to return to school to upgrade their skills because affordable daycare is readily available. That's where the premier's focus should lie.

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