

A little learning is a dangerous thing^[1]

Author: Radwanski, Adam

Source: Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 25 Aug 2009

EXCERPTS

On its face, it seems preposterous. In Canada's largest province, the cash-strapped government, besieged by an \$18.5-billion deficit, is preparing to pour hundreds of millions into full-day kindergarten even as it braces to freeze spending on most everything else.

And still, early-learning advocates descended on the provincial capital this week to demand that the government move faster, and do more.

To understand their impatience, consider what is at stake - not just in Ontario, but nationally. After decades of lobbying for a revolution in early childhood education, the door has finally been opened. And now, largely because of economic circumstance, they fear it may be closing again.

The advocates want Ontario to be the vanguard for a new model for raising children that could be adopted elsewhere. "All eyes are now rightly on Ontario," they implored this week in an open letter. "Do the right thing: wholesale change."

In Dalton McGuinty, they thought they had found a kindred spirit. He seemed intent on succeeding Bill Davis as Ontario's "education premier" even back in his opposition days, when he travelled abroad in search of school reforms. His first major policy document as Liberal Leader, titled First Steps, was aimed at improving services for children.

...

After being elected to a second term in 2007, Mr. McGuinty got serious about making that benefit universal, in a way that led the early-learning crowd to hope he was prepared to set a new national - perhaps even international - standard.

He enlisted Charles Pascal to recommend how best to make good on his promise, and the former deputy education minister and prominent social-justice activist is not the sort of person to narrowly interpret a mandate - nor did the Premier expect him to.

...

And so, drawing on "best practices" from around the world, Dr. Pascal put forward an incredibly intricate model - a "continuum of early learning, child care and family supports" essentially from birth through adolescence. In particular, schools would become year-round hubs offering full-day kindergarten plus programs before and after school, and in the summer, for children up to 12.

The problem is that its appearance coincides with a massive downturn in provincial revenues, so the government isn't inclined to exceed the \$500-million earmarked for the first two years of full-day learning. It also is realizing how expensive it is just to expand kindergarten, particularly now that teachers' unions oppose having less-costly early childhood educators work alone in the classroom.

Mr. McGuinty's officials are now fond of pointing out that they promised nothing beyond more kindergarten. ("Can't do it all overnight," is how the Premier puts it.) The signs are that, when they begin phasing in the program next year, they will follow Dr. Pascal's recommendation to offer fee-based day-care services in the morning and evening, so parents can keep preschoolers in one environment all day. But sources say they will not provide that service for older children, as the report proposed, and many of Dr. Pascal's other recommendations - including summer programs - will likely be on hold as well.

...

To some advocates, it sounds like a cop-out. From their perspective, full-day kindergarten and some integrated day care aren't all that far ahead of where other provinces are headed, and will, on their own, fail to end a fragmented approach that does a disservice to both children and parents.

Dr. Pascal clearly believes his model is greater than the sum of his parts. "Elements of the report you can find right across the country in different places," he says, "but the comprehensiveness I think has caught people's attention."

He wasn't just talking about Ontarians. "The blueprint is clear enough that the world will be able to audit" its implementation, he says. "I know people from other provinces and other jurisdictions are going to come and peek over our shoulder."

Dr. Pascal expresses optimism that, with time, his report will be adopted in full. But that may be small comfort to other activists. Mr. McGuinty will be in office only so long, and his successor may not share his passion. If the revolution does not happen now, it may never happen.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: kindergarten ^[3]

full-day early learning ^[4]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/09/11/little-learning-dangerous-thing>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/09/11/little-learning-dangerous-thing> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/kindergarten> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8149>