

# Mr. Premier, don't drag your heels on early learning report <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

In the next few days, Premier Dalton McGuinty will be making an announcement that could begin a revolution in education and help define his own legacy as a leader.

If the premier follows the blueprint laid out by his early learning adviser, not only will he set Ontario on a course to become one of the best places in the world to raise a child, he will up the province's competitiveness quotient in the same breath.

The plan, devised by former deputy minister of education Charles Pascal, is centred on schools. The goal is smarter, healthier kids, less harried parents and better economic returns.

The report is about so much more than replacing part-time kindergarten with a full-day program for 4- and 5-year-olds. It's about transforming schools into vibrant, family-centred learning hubs. Instead of operating for the regularly scheduled six hours a day, 188 days a year, they would open from 7:30 in the morning till 6 at night year-round.

Families could access helpful parenting information and resources and affordable on-site after-school activities for their children. No more ferrying kids back and forth to between school and daycare or recreation programs. Additional space in schools would be made available to municipalities to transform the array of parenting and child-care programs for younger kids into one-stop child and family centres.

Put it all together as the plan suggests and you've created a continuous learning system, an umbrella covering everyone in the school community from new parents and their babies to burgeoning adolescents.

This common-sense use of our schools is more cost-effective than the current labyrinth of child care, education and family-support services that frustrate parents, charging them and taxpayers more than they should.

Ironically, Ontario's economic woes make this an opportune time to modernize primary education. Even the most conservative economists agree: spending on learning and care programs for young kids is a stimulus package that keeps on giving. It creates jobs for educators and helps parents work. It's a powerful local economic multiplier - the money earned is spent in the community. And it pays off in greater competency in adulthood and less spending on mop-up programs.

Ontario's early learning revolution is considered "shovel ready" - 35 per cent of our schools already have the capacity to handle the first phase of change. With minor retrofitting, another third of schools could be operational within a year. For the remaining third, Ontario could draw down federal stimulus dollars to add classrooms.

By all accounts, families are telling the government they like the plan. Municipalities and school boards are preparing themselves for the changeover. Champions of publicly funded education are applauding. Other jurisdictions are looking to Ontario to lead the way.

According to media reports, however, the government is thinking of starting small - prepared to invest only in 4- and 5-year-olds by slowly rolling out a full school day with the option of before- and after-school, but no summer programming. Younger kids and school-aged children will need to wait until sometime in the future.

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The recommendations in the Pascal report are not a smorgasbord of choices but a tightly knit package designed to erase service fragmentation once and for all. Selecting some while delaying others creates its own set of problems.

Picking off only the 4- and 5-year-olds will destabilize child care. Unless the government comes up with bailout money, daycare centres will shut down and those that don't will be charging their remaining parents higher fees to keep afloat. Parents and taxpayers could end up footing the bill for an inefficient system that's not as good as it could, and should, be.

Doing it all is not a big stretch. If schools are already operating longer hours to accommodate 4- and 5-year-olds, it would take little more for their siblings to benefit.

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Premier McGuinty: You asked Dr. Pascal to advise you on the best way to implement full-day learning. He's delivered a transformational, effective and doable report that serves as a blueprint for Ontario and a benchmark for the rest of Canada. Our place on the education centre stage awaits your leadership.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** advocacy <sup>[3]</sup>

kindergarten <sup>[4]</sup>

full-day early learning <sup>[5]</sup>

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