

The right move on early learning^[1]

Editorial

Author: Toronto Star

Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 28 Oct 2009

EXCERPTS

Starting next September, Ontario's first wave of kindergarten kids will benefit from a full day of learning because Premier Dalton McGuinty stuck to his promise - despite the economic downturn.

It takes courage to introduce any new program - especially one that will cost \$1.5 billion a year once it is fully implemented - while the province is facing a \$24.7 billion deficit. But launching full-day kindergarten for 4- and 5-year-olds, along with fee-based before- and after-school daycare, is the right move for Ontario's children, families and, ultimately, our economy.

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It is refreshing that the government sees full-day kindergarten and access to daycare - which allows parents to work or retrain for better jobs - as an important economic policy, not just a social one.

However, because McGuinty and Education Minister Kathleen Wynne gave in to pressure from teachers' unions, they have raised the cost of the initiative, slowed its implementation, and compromised on the broader goal of creating a seamless system in which schools would act as community hubs catering to the needs of modern families.

Charles Pascal, McGuinty's early learning adviser, had recommended a \$1 billion program covering 240,000 children, with a full-day early childhood educator and half-day teacher in each class. Implementation would have taken three years. Instead, McGuinty has opted for a full-day teacher model, thereby raising the price tag to \$1.5 billion and dragging out the timeline to six years. This may ultimately prove a high price to pay to secure labour peace with the teachers.

Less than a quarter of 4- and 5-year-olds - about 50,000 - will get a full-day spot in the next two school years. The rest will have to wait until after the next provincial election. With the opposition Conservatives skeptical of the initiative, that means it may never happen.

By focusing solely on kindergarten kids - and only during the school year - the government's plan also creates uncertainties in our already unstable and underfunded daycare sector.

What are working parents supposed to do with their kindergarten kids in the summer? Where will they get before- and after-school care once they enter Grade 1? And finally, will some municipally run daycares, which are expected to continue providing care for younger children, close their doors or jack up prices when they lose the kindergarten-age kids, the source of much of their funding?

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Fortunately, there is still time to address these concerns. Meanwhile, McGuinty deserves credit for taking the important first step toward improving education for Ontario's youngest students.

On Tuesday, McGuinty said that the deficit would not force him into "unthinking" cuts or stop his government from moving forward on its central priorities - education, health and the economy. He could not have picked a better way to advance those priorities than by implementing full-day kindergarten and increasing access to daycare.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario^[2]

Tags: kindergarten^[3]

full-day early learning^[4]

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