

Battle lines drawn on full-day kindergarten ^[1]

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An election showdown is looming over full-day kindergarten, with Premier Dalton McGuinty vowing to expand the program to all schools by 2015 and his chief rival promising to "fix" it.

On Tuesday, Progressive Conservative leader Tim Hudak said the program is too expensive as designed and he wants to give parents the choice of full-day or half-day classes - which McGuinty's Liberals say is available now.

"We will be working on fixing the program that is there," Hudak said at Queen's Park, pledging to put more money into "front-line" teaching.

Hudak said how quickly and how extensively he would "fix" the program will depend on the financial state of the province.

McGuinty played the election card on a visit to Mount Joy Public School in Markham, greeting children on their first day of class and releasing an online ad touting the program, smaller class sizes and higher graduation rates.

The ad was also slated to appear on television news programs Tuesday night only, party officials said, although the official election campaign kickoff is almost a year away.

"I think it is not too soon for us to consider the choice we'll have next October," McGuinty told reporters, speaking of the Oct. 6, 2011 vote in which he will seek a third term.

"We are so keen on moving ahead with full-day kindergarten and getting it right," he added. "We have understood for a long time now that a strong start in school means that our kids are much more likely to graduate from high school and graduate from post-secondary education to get a good job and help us build a strong economy."

Both the Liberals and Conservatives are trying to shape full-day kindergarten into a "wedge issue," with the Liberals looking to change the channel on a summer in which they were hammered over eco fees, G20 policing, rising hydro rates and the 13 per cent HST, said NDP MPP Rosario Marchese, a former teacher.

"I believe the majority of people want this program to work and to work well," he said, accusing the Conservatives of being "deliberately vague" about their position on full-day kindergarten.

"They are trying to have it both ways, trying to say to some parents 'we aren't really opposed to it' but also saying to their constituencies 'we really are because we really think women should be looking after their kids.' They are trying to take a confusing, paradoxical position."

Until Tuesday, Hudak had refused to say what he would do about all-day kindergarten, which will cost \$1.5 billion annually when it is implemented in all 4,000 elementary schools. He has been critical of it as an added expense for taxpayers hard-hit in the recession and with the province fighting a \$19.3 billion deficit.

Hudak acknowledged the kindergarten program will be into its second year if the Conservatives win next fall's election.

"We'll have some 50,000 kids across the province in 800 schools in full-day learning. We'll have to be conscious of that."

But Hudak suggested he wants to cut the cost of the program, possibly by using more early childhood education workers in place of higher-paid teachers.

"We're willing to look at all models to make sure we get what's best for the kids and their parents . . . we'll have a year to observe."

Hudak said he wants to make sure that full-day kindergarten attendance is optional if parents prefer to send their children for half days.

"The one-size-fits-all, must-enroll-your-kid-full-day as opposed to giving a choice to parents, I think that Dalton McGuinty has decided that Premier Dad knows best," he told reporters.

A spokesperson for Education Minister Leona Dombrowsky said parents already have choice because under Ontario law children do not have to attend school until age 6.

"Full-day kindergarten is not mandatory," said Erin Moroz. "Like existing kindergarten programs, parents can choose to remove their child for part of the day if that is what works best for them."

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-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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