

# Hudak's stand on kindergarten risks raising ire of families <sup>[1]</sup>

Tory Leader could end up on the defensive about issue in next election

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## EXCERPTS

In 15 months at the helm of Ontario's opposition, Tim Hudak has made scarcely any memorable gaffes. Disciplined to a fault, the Conservative Leader runs the risk of getting repetitive strain injury in his jaw from mouthing the same talking points over and over. Better that, he and his strategists figure, than rushing into policy positions he'll later regret.

It's baffling, then, that Mr. Hudak seems to have walked right into Dalton McGuinty's early-learning trap.

"When your credit cards are maxed out and you have no money in the bank, you don't go out and buy a new car," Mr. Hudak said last winter about the Premier's plans to introduce full-day kindergarten province-wide. He's been a little more equivocal since, but hasn't changed the impression that he opposes the program in principle.

He's not alone in that view; some experts, though far from all, believe it's a waste of money to pay for universal full-day kindergarten. But in terms of the retail politics at which he's usually quite gifted, Mr. Hudak has risked raising the ire of many of the "hard-working Ontario families" he mentions in most of his speeches.

It's been clear from the outset that, in addition to a genuine passion for public education, Mr. McGuinty was drawn to early learning because he thinks it plays well with voters, particularly in key suburban battlegrounds. He's fond of arguing that parents living "hectic, just-in-time lives" will welcome the program. In an interview last September, before the specifics of the program had been announced, Mr. McGuinty spoke of the "comfort and security" in having one's children in school for the entire day.

The Tories might dispute the extent to which parents were clamoring for full-day kindergarten before it was announced. But once they have that option, or have been promised it very soon, it's hard to imagine most will want to give it up.

Removing full-day kindergarten from schools in which it's already been introduced - a significant number by next fall - would be such a logistical nightmare that Mr. Hudak may wind up ruling it out during next year's election campaign.

But even if he does so, he'll likely get stuck on the defensive - not least, if the Liberals have their way, for comparing educating children to getting a new car. It's unlikely to be the same kind of disaster that Mr. Hudak's predecessor, John Tory, endured in the last election over his promise to expand funding to religious schools. But the Liberals are so excited by the opportunity to fight another campaign on education policy that they're already running ads in hope of striking a contrast between the two parties' positions.

The odd part is that Mr. Hudak could easily have neutralized the issue, and even played it to his advantage, by supporting the general idea of full-day kindergarten and then criticizing the implementation. He could have argued, for instance, that it wouldn't be so costly and require five years to roll out if the Liberals weren't so preoccupied with keeping unions happy as they divide up the new workload between teachers and early childhood educators - a theme that could fit into his general message about the Liberals failing to put families first, rather than distract from it.

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

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