

Ontario alters kindergarten program, opening door to private daycares ^[1]

Author: Hammer, Kate

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EXCERPTS

The Ontario government is backtracking on a key component of its full-day-kindergarten program by allowing daycare centres to provide care for children before and after school.

The move, confirmed by Premier Dalton McGuinty on Wednesday, represents a key change from the original program, which sought to make schools one-stop centres for childcare and education.

The government has come under pressure to make the change by lobbyists for daycare centres that stood to lose business under the program, as well as by school boards that were reluctant to take on responsibility for providing before- and after-school care.

Mr. McGuinty said his government is now providing an option for parents and school boards in response to concerns expressed by parents.

"We heard, from some parents, concerns about us taking away their early-childhood educator, taking away a program that they already had confidence in," he told reporters. "We are making amendments as we go to ensure that we get it right."

Mr. McGuinty denied a Toronto Star report saying his government is expected to scrap plans altogether for school boards to run the daycare program for kindergarten students.

"Before- and after-school programming is still mandatory where there is sufficient parental demand," he said. "That has not changed. What we are saying to parents and the boards is you now have a choice."

The vision behind full-day kindergarten, according to program architect Charles Pascal, was that children would be able to stay in one place - before and after school, and throughout the summer - and that schools would become hubs of care for families.

"We're no longer in visionary territory here. We've lost that important idea of integrating childcare and education," said Annie Kidder, executive director of People for Education.

Mr. McGuinty, however, said the ultimate goal of the program is to have children stay in one place. In future, he said, daycare providers that participate in the full-day kindergarten program will have to operate their centres within the schools.

Progressive Conservative MPP Lisa MacLeod accused the Premier of not listening to parents who voiced concerns about losing access to their childcare centres when all-day kindergarten was launched.

"It's no surprise that Mr. McGuinty is backtracking," she told reporters. "It just speaks to how out of touch he really is."

New Democratic education critic Rosario Marchese said the Premier has created uncertainty by changing his mind.

By giving parents a choice, Mr. Marchese said, the government is creating a "hodge-podge" of programming across the province.

"Some [students] will be able to go to a school program, others will not," he said. "That creates more confusion."

The before- and after-school component of the program has struggled from the start. Following backlash from daycare providers who would be ousted from schools by the program, legislation was enacted nearly a year ago in order to give them some grace time to hand the reins to the schools. Meanwhile, uptake on the school-board-based programs has been weak because the government was slow to provide a price tag to parents.

Only about 40 per cent of schools offer on-site before- and after-school care, and the vast majority, about three-quarters, use an outside provider.

Other provinces, including British Columbia, Prince Edward Island and Quebec, already offer or have begun offering full-day kindergarten. Mr. McGuinty's program is unique in that it incorporates two years of revamped curriculum for junior and senior kindergarten, and puts children as young as 3 in full-day classrooms.

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Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: affordability ^[3]

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availability ^[5]

school system ^[6]

full-day early learning ^[7]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/affordability> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/public-opinion> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/availability> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/school-system> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8149>