

McGuinty must fix signature program ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

When Premier Dalton McGuinty committed to full-day kindergarten for 4- and 5-year-olds he said it would do three things: "Help our kids succeed in schools down the road; save families time and money; and free up thousands of licensed child-care spaces."

Already, 35,000 children are benefiting from his kindergarten pledge. This September, another 15,000 will join them. So far, so good.

But McGuinty has acted only on that part of his plan and left aside the rest of what was supposed to be a much broader push to meet all the needs of young children and their families. As a result, he has fallen short on his two other objectives: easing the burden for parents and opening up much-needed child-care spaces.

As the Star's Laurie Monsebraaten reported in the Child-Care Challenge series on Saturday, parent fees are rising and some daycares may close. That leaves parents with fewer options than ever.

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The government should get back on track with the original vision before the child-care crisis gets even worse as full-day kindergarten is expanded to all schools by 2015.

Many parents are already at their wit's end. They put their names on daycare waiting lists before their children are born. Those lucky enough to get a regulated space routinely pay \$60 a day for it. It's no surprise that waiting lists for subsidized spaces keep growing.

So far, Education Minister Leona Dombrowsky's only answer to all this is to point to the substantial investments in child care the government has made in previous budgets, and its plans to open up before- and after-school care in schools to third-party providers. Neither fixes today's problems.

And what will the future bring? Full-day kindergarten -- combined with inadequate child care -- will be implemented for only 20 per cent of Ontario's 4- and 5-year-olds by the provincial election that will be held in October. With the present system underfunded and the future up in the air, it's likely to turn into a political football.

Already, Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak has likened the plan to a "shiny new car" that Ontarians can't afford.

The last thing weary parents need is more turmoil and another change in course. Full-day kindergarten and affordable child care are vital for our youngest students and their families.

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