

Fate of all-day kindergarten in hands of Ontario voters ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 7 Mar 2011

EXCERPTS.

The future of Ontario's fledgling all-day kindergarten program will be determined in the October election.

As the signature policy of Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty's second term is slowly phased in across the province, the opposition Progressive Conservatives are refusing to commit to its full implementation.

Tory Leader Tim Hudak said Monday that expanding full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-olds throughout Ontario is "going to be contingent on the finances that are left behind."

"If we continue down this path of spending on everything under the sun... that puts that ability in jeopardy," said Hudak, who is leading in most public opinion polls.

The innovative program, which the Liberals promised during the 2007 election, was launched last September in about 600 schools.

By 2012-13, it will be available in 1,700 of Ontario's 4,000 schools and fully implemented the following year at a cost of \$1.5 billion annually.

With the Tories expected to pledge tax relief and tackle soaring hydro bills in the Oct. 6 campaign while coping with an \$18.7 billion budget deficit, all-day kindergarten may not be a priority.

"Our ability to expand the program beyond where it currently is will be dependent on the finances we have in the treasury," said Hudak.

"Dalton McGuinty knows that. That's why he's making all kinds of promises today to try to win votes when I bet he has no intention of keeping his promises," said the PC leader.

"The challenge is he announced additional schools and time frames and didn't set aside any additional funds to pay for it. They're the ones that chose to roll it out at different schools at different times," he said.

"For those schools that have it, we'll keep the program and work with parents and teachers and ECEs (early childhood educators) on the best way to make sure it's working in the best interests of the kids."

But Education Minister Leona Dombrowsky countered by saying "their plan is to create have and have-not schools and we are not doing that."

"We are committed to full-day kindergarten for all children by 2014. That's what parents have told us they wanted. That's what we're committed to," she said.

Dombrowsky predicted that a Tory government would "create a crisis" in education and then use it as an excuse to cancel costly programs.

"It's most unfair to the children of Ontario - certainly, their parents - to have no plan, but to say 'Well, where it is implemented we'll maintain it and where it is, well, we don't think we will,' the minister said.

She also bristled at the suggestion the Liberals would break their promise about fully phasing it in by 2014.

"Education is a priority for us as is full-day kindergarten."

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath, whose party supports all-day kindergarten, said she is "concerned about the lengthy rollout" because it suggests the Liberals are not that committed to the program.

"I don't know from one day to the next what this government's promises are worth, whether they're worth the paper that they're written on," she said.

- reprinted from Toronto Star (Parentcentral.ca)

Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: budget ^[3]

election ^[4]

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demand ^[6]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/budget> [4]
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/election> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/accessibility> [6]
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/demand> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8149>