

The education of Tim Hudak on full-day K^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Changebook, the Tory campaign platform, tells the story of the party's surprising change of heart on full-day kindergarten.

Full-day K, as it is widely known, once loomed as a major flashpoint in the coming campaign. But ahead of the Oct. 6 vote, the issue has largely been neutralized by the Tories.

Changebook won't change the program, according to Page 21 of the glossy, 34-page guide: "We will implement full-day kindergarten for all schools."

For two years, Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak had railed against the ambitious new program being rolled out by Ontario's Liberal government. So how did Hudak see the light?

He did his homework by reading the polls and studying the findings of focus groups. And he feared a public spanking.

The education of Tim Hudak on full-day K sheds light on the Tory leader's political style: going by the gut, but also road-testing his policies with the party base and fine-tuning his final decisions based on the polls.

It also reveals how much Hudak is haunted by the ghost of faith-based funding, the disastrous 2007 election promise that sank his predecessor. His caucus and campaign team live in dread of falling into another trap of their own making.

That's why Elizabeth Witmer, the party's tough-minded education critic, told Hudak he was on the wrong side of the issue. So did former party leader John Tory and former premier Bill Davis.

But Hudak had reflexively opposed full-day K when Premier Dalton McGuinty acted on the recommendation of his early-learning adviser, Charles Pascal.

"When your credit card is maxed out, when you have no money in your bank account, Ontario families don't go out and buy a shiny new car," Hudak said last year. Full-day K "is just not affordable at this point in time."

He refused to commit to any future rollout. It wasn't just a matter of money - \$1.4 billion a year by 2014 - but ideology and politics. Instead, Hudak held out a classic Tory alternative: putting cash in parents' hands.

A PC survey asked voters about scrapping full-day K to "provide parents with direct financial support to allow them to choose the child-care option that works best for them."

The answer came back that Ontarians actually liked full-day K. That's also what MPPs were hearing from parents and school trustees in their ridings. With growing pushback from caucus, Hudak gave Witmer a hearing - but still didn't heed his education critic.

That changed when the party did its own intensive polling. Witmer, who wears her social conscience on her sleeve, acknowledged privately to her education contacts that Tory focus groups showed overwhelming support.

When I asked her about it this week, Witmer replied - with admirable circumspection - that her leader had wisely considered all the evidence: Hudak "became well aware of the fact that the program was well supported by families throughout the province."

And the focus groups? "I credit my leader for always carefully considering the information that is brought forward."

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