

A lot of questions remain unanswered on future of education ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:What a difference a recession makes.

Education was a top item in the provincial election campaigns of 2003 and 2007.

It's virtually missing in action this time -- save for some talk about school fundraising -- muscled out by the economy, taxes and jobs.

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And if I could ask a few questions at Tuesday night's televised leaders' debate, here is what they would be:

How will you pay for the full roll-out of all-day kindergarten?

All-day kindergarten -- \$1.5 billion a year when fully operational, according to the Liberals who initiated it -- is not even an issue, since all three leaders say they're committed to it. (The program has reached about a quarter of Ontario elementary schools so far). But how do they plan to do it? Next year will be the biggest push thus far, when the Liberals had planned to double the number of schools offering the program. Where will that money come from when the economy is getting battered?

Which leads to -- How will you build and renovate the space needed for all-day kindergarten, within the Liberals' five-year timeline?

Getting details from the Liberals on the estimated costs to build and renovate appropriate kindergarten space (schools will need to double existing space to keep kids twice as long) was like pulling teeth. Eventually, they coughed up it would mean an extra one-time, \$1.5 billion cost on top of \$1.5 billion to operate the program. They said that money was set aside in the last provincial budget -- but you won't find hard details in anything that's been publicly released.

The Conservatives had questioned whether the Liberals could stick to their own five-year rollout, given financing and the short timelines. But now that the PCs say they'll stick with the program, how do they propose to pull it off themselves?

School boards say the number of students needing help for learning, physical and intellectual disabilities is growing, even though overall enrolment is dropping. Families of these students complain their kids still are not getting the help they need. What needs to be changed in special education and how will you do it?

More kids are getting help and there's more cash in the system. But there are still plenty of kids waiting and questions about the effectiveness of the help kids are receiving -- something raised in an auditor general's report three years ago. Meanwhile school boards complain they're still not getting the funds they need to help everybody.

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Region: Ontario ^[2]

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