

Full-day kindergarten never at risk ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Brace yourself for the political equivalent of pouting, finger-pointing and kids holding their breath until they turn blue.

In the end, none of it will matter--the Ontario Liberal government's full-day kindergarten program will survive, unless Dalton McGuinty, the self-styled "education premier," does a U-turn on his most cherished legacy.

If there was any doubt, Finance Minister Dwight Duncan squelched that Monday.

We might have guessed that, despite the fact the program is expected to come under a harsh spotlight in former TD Bank chief economist Don Drummond's hundreds of recommendations, to be released Wednesday, on how the government can cut its \$16 billion deficit. Drummond is expected to recommend the program be axed. Only because the cat got out of the bag before Wednesday's release was Duncan forced to publicly apply the brakes.

Politically, McGuinty needs full-day kindergarten, even though its full cost is worth about 15 cents for every dollar the government will spend servicing its massive debt this year. All along, it was almost certainly the government's plan to come to the rescue of full-day kindergarten, so that other cuts will be politically easier for the public to swallow.

Parents love full-day kindergarten, and why not? Those who have it are spared huge childcare costs. Those who don't, can't wait for their schools to get it. Politically, it's a no-brainer for the government--a hit out of the park, no matter its \$1.5 billion cost when fully rolled out.

The education lobby will be aghast that kindergarten was ever thrust under the budget-cutting spotlight. It will rush Wednesday to its defence against future such inroads. Teachers, early childhood educators, school boards-- all have a stake in seeing the program fully extended. Opposition politicians will find themselves painted into a corner, unable to fault a government for saving what, besides a year of education, is also costly babysitting.

A decades-old feature of many North American school systems, full-day kindergarten still has a new-classroom smell in Ontario. It cost \$200 million to adopt when the Liberals started to phase it in in the last school year. It will set taxpayers back another \$300 million this year, hitting its \$1.5 billion peak once all the new construction and other costs are counted.

But politics aside, it's also a program long overdue in Ontario, whose future now--in a post-industrial era--depends more than ever on smarts, including getting its youngest citizens learning quickly.

In 1995, Ontario's Royal Commission on Learning effectively said Ontario should stop coddling older teenagers and focus more on young learners. It recommended scrapping Grade 13 and offering school for three-year-olds. The fifth year of high school, which the commission found did little to help student achievement, fell by the wayside.

But instead of investing savings from Grade 13 into the front end of education, Ontario's patchwork of largely half-day junior and senior kindergarten--until now. The Liberals could yet delay the final rollout until they whip the books into shape. That would show the government is prepared to sacrifice one of its own sacred cows as it asks Ontarians to accept cuts in other areas. It might also appease critics baying for budget blood, after eight years of a high-spending government that whacked Ontarians with the largest new taxes in their history--the personal health tax and HST--but still can't balance its books.

Yes, full-day kindergarten could be sent for a political timeout. That might even be smart. But the program isn't going to be expelled from the education system. It never was.

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