

Education cuts 'misguided' and 'shocking,' say experts ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Ontario's education system would be set back a decade if the province were to implement the tough measures recommended by Don Drummond, warned educators who were left reeling by his call for cuts to full-day kindergarten, larger classes and even charging some students to ride the school bus.

The report also suggests charging students who take a "victory lap" fifth year of high school to brush up their marks, and making sweeping cuts to support staff from psychologists to guidance counselors.

"Our primary concern is that, on the education front, Drummond is looking for a quick fix for a financial situation that's been a long time in the making," said Catherine Fife, president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association.

She called it "misguided" to cut full-day kindergarten or end the so-called "victory lap."

Drummond wants school boards to charge students who take more courses than they need to graduate, which costs taxpayers \$400 million. He recommends schools let students take 32 credits for free — two more than needed to graduate — but any more would come with a fee.

Other recommendations are too drastic to consider and would devastate education, said teacher unions.

"We're not just talking about numbers here, we're talking about children," noted Sam Hammond, president of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. He said Drummond's ideas would "take education back a decade."

Annie Kidder, of the advocacy group People for Education, found the report "shocking" and said the call for fees for busing and high school credits "flies in the face of how public education is supposed to work."

Drummond argues in the report there is no proof smaller classes improve learning — even though test scores have climbed since the Liberals cut class sizes — and suggests primary classes could grow from 20 to 23. In grades 4 through 8, he suggests hiking the average to 26 from 24.5, and in high school the average could rise to 24 from 22 without affecting student learning or the dropout rate.

But larger classes could cost 6,000 teacher jobs — the equivalent of shutting down 40 schools, cautioned Kevin O'Dwyer, president of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association.

"I don't think Mr. Drummond understands the effects the recommendations would have in the classroom," said O'Dwyer. "He's an economist . . . he gets the spreadsheets, but kids in those classrooms don't occupy a cell in those spreadsheets."

Neither teachers nor parents will accept larger classes, warned Hammond, who called the current size "ideal" for covering curriculum and giving attention to students. Ken Coran, president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation said larger classes would affect

the amount of attention students receive.

As for full-day kindergarten, Drummond said if it is not scrapped — and Finance Minister Dwight Duncan repeated Wednesday that it would not be — then it should be rolled out more slowly and have classes of 20 children led by only a teacher, not classes of 26 led by a teacher and early childhood educator.

Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak, who has flip-flopped on full-day learning, changed his position again Wednesday, calling it too expensive.

“I know that’s not great news for people who were looking forward to that program but it’s time that somebody actually did some straight talk in the province of Ontario,” he said.

Yet even changing it would remove many benefits, insisted Kerry McCuaig, the fellow in early childhood policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

“What is worrisome is the recommendation that full-day kindergarten be delivered without early childhood educators” who are trained specifically in early childhood development, she said.

Drummond also suggests school boards lose 70 per cent of the 13,800 extra non-teaching staff it has provided funding for since 2003 — a move bound to be unpopular since these include such heavily used support staff as psychologists, education assistants, guidance counsellors and library assistants.

Drummond recommends school boards consider charging user fees for school buses if needed, although special help would be offered to students of lower income, special needs and rural areas.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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full-day kindergarten ^[4]

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