

Ontario needs to fix another full-day kindergarten mess: Editorial ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

It's another classic case of good intentions, bad execution. The Ontario government's ambitious plan for full-day kindergarten is creating turmoil for daycare centres in Toronto schools because, as usual, nothing unfolds as it should.

For some daycares, the financial and operational complications created by the new before-and-after-school care - for four- and five-year-old kindergarten students - have made the program almost impossible to provide. For parents, it means higher costs, lost hot lunch programs and ongoing uncertainty about whether the programs will run during summer months when working parents need help the most.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. The original concept by educator Charles Pascal envisioned a seamless day of enriched child care provided by the schools (not daycares).envisioned a seamless day of enriched child care provided by the schools (not daycares). Learning could begin as early as 7:30 a.m. and when the 9 a.m. bell rang, the kindergarten kids would march to their class for the day. The same students could remain in the after-school program until 6 p.m., turning schools into day-long vibrant communities.

Volumes of research show that early childhood education benefits kids in many lasting ways. As Pascal wrote in a 2009 report, "Investing in early learning provides a remarkable return in better outcomes for children and a healthier and more prosperous society for everyone."

Former premier Dalton McGuinty rightly embraced the plan but, all too predictably, this fine concept fell apart during the implementation. The province didn't provide the money needed for the before-and-after school programs and the Toronto District School Board (which chose the most expensive model) refused to take responsibility. Last summer, the province caved in, allowing boards to use daycare centres.

As the Star's Laurie Monsebraaten reported this week, many daycare administrators in Toronto schools say the system is so flawed that they don't want to run the programs. Toronto daycares are already at risk due to severe underfunding. Now, staff say they are losing subsidies, struggling to find space that meets daycare licensing requirements, and can't find staff willing to work split shifts.

In fact, roughly a third of the 88 daycare centres that currently offer the before-and-after programs say they face intense pressure from City of Toronto staff to run them even though they're losing money.

As Jane Mercer of the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care says, "The province has downloaded this program onto school boards who have side-loaded it to community-based child care and said, 'here, you do it'."

It's a sorry drama. Right now, 1,900 of roughly 23,000 Toronto children in full-day kindergarten are in before-and after-school care programs. Increasing demand means that next year a total of 199 daycare programs are expected to operate, so the daycare dilemma will only grow.

To solve this, all of the parties need to step out of their respective sandboxes and work toward a solution. Ultimately, it's the province that must lead. The education ministry now oversees both schools and daycare - it's time to review the problems and fix them.

After all, the Liberal government was supposed to create an enriching day-long learning experience for little kids, not turn adults against each other.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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