

# Gordon: Hudak's plan for education doesn't add up <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Given how much of Ontario Progressive Conservative leader Tim Hudak's platform relies on fuzzy math from a far right-wing economist, perhaps it isn't all that surprising that funding education ranks so low on his list of priorities.

Still, it's disappointing our children will be the ones who pay the price for a cash windfall that corporations can expect under a new Tory premier.

Here, the corporate tax rate would drop from 11.5 per cent (already third-lowest in Canada) to eight per cent. Meanwhile, class sizes would go up, and a yet-unknown number of teachers and early childhood educators would be out of work - teachers' unions have suggested 19,000 education positions would be slashed.

The current 20-student cap on class sizes up to Grade 3 would rise to 23, the class size average would move from 24.5 students to 26 for Grades 4 to 8, and high school classes would bump up from 22 to 24.

Where Hudak's plan really has the potential to do undeniable, significant damage is to the fledgling full-day kindergarten program. Although he has surrendered to the reality that he can no longer kill it off, he'll be gutting it nonetheless.

Why? Because junior and senior kindergarten classes aren't capped due to the fact they're run by teams: one teacher and one early childhood educator. According to the ministry of education, funding is based on an average class size of 26 students.

Torch the ECEs and combine classes, and suddenly under Hudak's plan the student to adult ratio of 13 to 1 becomes, on average, a 20 to 1 ratio.

Research that looked at class sizes suggests this could be a significant mistake.

In 2011, the Brookings Institution dug into vast amount of literature on class size effects on academic achievement and identified three studies it considered of high enough quality to serve as a basis for legislative action.

The most influential was the Student Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) study, conducted in Tennessee in the late 1980s.

"In this study, students and teachers were randomly assigned to a small class, with an average of 15 students, or a regular class, with an average of 22 students. This large reduction in class size (seven students, or 32 per cent) was found to increase student achievement by an amount equivalent to about three additional months of schooling four years later.

"Studies of class size in Texas and Israel also found benefits of smaller classes," the report notes, though those gains were smaller.

Brookings preaches caution because of the small number of credible studies, including a couple that served up mixed results, "But it appears that very large class-size reductions ... can have significant long-term effects on student achievement and other meaningful outcomes."

The effects were found to be largest when introduced in the earliest grades, and for students from less advantaged family backgrounds.

A later report by the think tank noted "allowing class sizes to increase can be a way to absorb budget cuts without cutting other programs such as athletics and the arts," but pointed out such a move is politically treacherous.

It's treacherous for a reason. Parents don't need the STAR study to see that their children achieve better outcomes when their instructors can actually give them more than a few harried moments of attention.

This year, I watched my four-year-old son learn how to skate over two organized sessions. His progress in the first was impressive, as he learned to stand up on the ice and move around. In the second he learned, well, not much.

This was more than hitting a plateau. In Session 1, two veteran instructors had the time to deal with the kids they were trying to teach individually. The second saw an influx of new participants, and the instructors couldn't keep up. As such, while the teachers dealt with the children who were much further behind, or who were throwing temper tantrums, or whatever the reason, the kids who were ready to take

the next step were left to wander around, looking for something to do.

Now imagine a kindergarten teacher trying to deal with 20 four and five-year-olds all day long.

Hudak has a point on student performance in our schools: it ain't ... ehm, isn't ... good enough.

But common sense, which can't be taught in school or quantified by an "independent" economist, suggests cutting teachers and early childhood educators to help fund unnecessary corporate tax cuts probably won't help.

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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