

PC plans for full-day kindergarten would mean more classrooms, fewer educators ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

They're the ones who know all about child development, have expertise in play-based learning and are considered a key part of Ontario's new full-day kindergarten program.

They're also the ones who will lose their jobs under a Progressive Conservative plan.

By this fall - the final rollout of the all-day program for Ontario's youngest students - some 11,420 early childhood educators, or ECEs, will be working with teachers in kindergarten classrooms across the province. Class sizes average 26 students, although some are much larger. Latest Ontario election news

The PCs say that, if elected, they will move to a teacher-only model to save \$200 million, and shrink kindergarten classes to 20 kids. They note that changes were recommended in the Don Drummond report commissioned by the Liberal government, but not implemented.

The Tory plan means one in 10 of the 100,000 public sector jobs Tim Hudak vows to cut will be a kindergarten early childhood educator.

Janet McDougald, chair of the Peel District School Board, said with 800 kindergarten classes in her region, going from 26 to 20 students would require 104 new rooms at a cost of \$40 to \$50 million.

While PC Leader Tim Hudak has also said he'd increase class sizes in all other grades, which would open up 224 classrooms in Peel, they won't necessarily be in the places where they're needed, she added.

"Certainly in a school with 18 full-day kindergarten classes, which we have, that will create classrooms. In a school with two, it may not," McDougald said.

"The issue here, too, is that full-day kindergarten classrooms are purpose-built," she added, because young students are supposed to have extra space as well as washrooms and sinks in their rooms. "For every three (regular classrooms), we can make two purpose-built kindergarten classrooms.

"... I hope that if this is indeed their plan, they've factored in capital costs."

McDougald said one teacher overseeing 20 children as young as 3 is also of concern.

"Is this in the best interest of kids (to lose the ECE)?" she asked. "I don't think so."

Early childhood educator Emily Wright, who has worked in a Toronto kindergarten classroom for the past year, oversees 31 kids alongside a teacher.

She said while the full-day program isn't perfect - she's not given time to work with the teacher to prepare or help plan lessons - it's still "a wonderful initiative.

"I think it's something Ontario needs," she said.

Wright, 29, said she was surprised that eliminating ECEs is on the table.

Other critics have suggested that in order to save money, the Tories could have proposed having two ECEs teach full-day kindergarten, because that would still be less expensive than one teacher.

Charles Pascal of the University of Toronto, the architect of Ontario's full-day kindergarten program, said the teacher-ECE team approach is what makes it work.

"A high-quality early learning team with certified teachers and early child educators is absolutely key to bringing about the social, emotional and achievement return for kids and families, and the economic return for society at large," he said. He noted it is already proving successful.

"Cheapening it by reducing the staffing capability and increasing the ratios is dangerously short-sighted and a false economy," Pascal said.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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