

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The High Cost of Early Learning

Andrea Mrozek – Published November 25, 2009

When Ontario's Finance Minister announced last month that the provincial deficit would be substantially higher than predicted, it was followed up by talk of restraint. "We will change how we do business in this province," he said. "We are becoming an even leaner and even more efficient provider of quality public services."

Really? The government is on track to expand the public sector and push the province further into the red. The reason is full-day kindergarten, set to start next year.

A study by the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada shows that the real cost of full-day kindergarten is almost double initial estimates and will probably come in at \$1.8-billion annually. And, unknown to many, it is but one step in a grander plan to create public-school hubs for the "prenatal period through adolescence." This was the blueprint put forward by education adviser Charles Pascal and published by the government in June. The cost would be \$6.1-billion annually, according to our study.

Activists are set on implementation of the full plan. "[Pascal's] report is about so much more than replacing part-time kindergarten with a full-day program for four- and five-year-olds," two advocates said recently. They continued: "[I]t's about transforming schools into vibrant, family-centred learning hubs. Instead of operating for the regularly scheduled six hours a day, 188 days a year, they would open from 7:30 in the morning till 6 at night year-round."

This is, apparently, absolutely critical for kids and will create a sort of education nirvana: relaxed parents dropping their kindergarten kids, toddlers and babies off at the same public school.

The reality will be much different. These programs are not a slam dunk for children – the social science is divided on outcomes, a point apparently entirely lost on Dr. Pascal. And the financials are a guaranteed debacle. Our study includes realistic estimates of salary and benefit costs, capital and operating costs, as well as increased bureaucracy costs, but there are additional ones that Dr. Pascal's report glosses over.

There is unlimited potential for cost overruns in government-run early-learning programs. Infant care, for example, is exponentially more expensive. There has already been talk of increasing kindergarten class sizes to 26 from 20 – teacher-child ratios at young ages are critical and keeping them low is expensive. Dr. Pascal fails to mention the added security concerns that come with expanded kindergarten/daycare programs, as well as the cost of providing healthy food. All this, and much more, are part of the expanded vision.

To understand how such programs work (or don't, as the case may be), Ontarians need look no further than Quebec. The only province to have a full provincial daycare plan, Quebec began with full-day kindergarten in 1997. It spent \$209-million on child-care programs in 1995-96, but it spends close to \$2-billion today – all for a program whose quality is acknowledged to be mediocre. Quebec taxpayers are paying for a luxury sedan, but driving an economy car. Is this what Ontario needs?

Once early-learning activists are done, a \$24.7-billion provincial deficit will start to sound reasonable. The sad thing is our study finds that if parents were given the money instead, they could receive a minimum of \$9,199 per child annually. A better idea would be to let them keep their hard-earned dollars in the first place, thereby allowing them to make their own choices for their children.

The bottom line is that Ontario taxpayers deserve transparency on costs before we walk down this road. Right now, only one outcome appears certain: higher taxes today for a heftier deficit tomorrow. That's a lesson our children should not have to learn early.

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