

Cut full-day kindergarten altogether

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Reports on Wednesday that the Ontario Liberals would cut before-and after-care in the new all-day kindergarten program had advocates for the idea of a "seamless day of early learning" up in arms. Premier Dalton McGuinty claimed yesterday there would be no disruption for parents and everything is going according to plan, but really, the biggest disruption of all was the completely thoughtless rollout of this extravagant, expensive, untested and unnecessary program to begin with.

Ideally, the entire program would be canned. Failing that, any decision to cut parts of it should be applauded as brave and necessary.

In June 2009, Charles Pascal, special adviser to Mc-Guinty on early learning, submitted a report to the government. It was absolutely sweeping. It called for the government to provide care encompassing "the prenatal period through to adolescence," as the report reads. Day care for all of Ontario's children would be situated in public schools, available from 7:30 in the morning, to 6 p.m. (The first step in the grand plan was the move to all-day kindergarten.) The schools would be hubs -- one-stop shops for day care, health care and school.

It was the kind of sweeping vision that might look good on paper, but leaves most people asking "What's the catch?" And the catches are indeed numerous, but let's focus on the cost.

The initial cost estimate for the program as stated in the Pascal report was just shy of \$1 billion annually. Our own cost estimates at the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada rang in at a minimum of \$1.5 to \$1.8 billion annually, for full-day kindergarten alone, leaving aside the other elements of Pascal's vision. Put differently, this is \$9,000 per child, annually. What parent wouldn't know how to spend that money better than government?

Few families running a budget deficit would go ahead with a massive renovation and expansion on their homes. With an annual budget deficit of \$18.7 billion, Ontario's government was happy to do just that, claiming substantial benefits to children's learning. That was the worst part, since the purported benefits for children are based on scant evidence. Research does show targeted programs for small numbers of disadvantaged children reap rewards. There is nothing to say broad-based programs for hundreds of thousands of children will prove beneficial in the long run.

Even in the short time since September, evidence has accumulated that the province is spending a substantial amount of money without doing much well. Retired teacher Anne Doak summarized many of the problems, writing a letter to this newspaper. There were too many kids in one area and too few adults to help, some of the children were still only three years old and 26 children were spending the day in a space meant for 15. In short, she said this: "What I've seen even with the excellent program being provided in spite of all this is a nightmare for both the staff and children who are not being served adequately."

Well-meaning though Mc-Guinty and Pascal might be, this is the sort of program that costs a lot, while offering only one monolithic choice to every single family. For example, a family that chooses to have a parent stay at home, or to leave children with grandparents pays twice, once for the care they choose (a spouse or grandparent) and again for the care they didn't choose (a taxpayer-funded system).

This program is a boondoggle. It's been confusing, expensive, poorly thought out and won't reap the anticipated rewards with children. Ontario's families will be paying for this for a long while to come.

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