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Costs and benefits of full day kindergarten

Assessing the costs versus benefits of government early learning plans is indeed important

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Do the high costs associated with universal early learning programs matter? Absolutely. We should indeed question high costs for public programs, in particular when returns are by no means guaranteed. The reality for early learning programs is that other jurisdictions show limited long term positive outcomes for kids. That makes asking cost-benefit questions relevant.

When the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada released [*The Cost of a Free Lunch: The real costs of the Pascal early learning plan for Ontario*](#) on November 25, the intent was to provide Ontario's taxpayers with financial transparency and to show that if the funds were spent differently, parents could receive a substantial sum—over \$9,000 per child annually—in their pockets. Our fiscal assessment put the costs of full-day kindergarten in Ontario between \$1.5 billion and \$1.8 billion annually, with costs rising to over \$6 billion were full implementation of the Pascal blueprint to move ahead. The purpose of the study was limited to a transparent assessment of the numbers. [1]

And yet the question of costs is secondary to the main point, which is that there is scant evidence from other jurisdictions to suggest these billions of dollars will achieve significant positive outcomes for children. If early learning goals are not met, Ontario is on the road to one tremendously expensive babysitting service.

A brief look at other jurisdictions reveals high costs with mixed outcomes. Quebec, California, Georgia and Oklahoma are examples of increased public dollars resulting in less than stellar results.

The much-praised Quebec universal daycare system shows a mediocre level of care. The authors of a 2005 paper write "overall, the results of our evaluation show that the majority of child care settings attended by the QLSCD children meet the basic criteria for quality — that is, they ensure the children's health and safety — but their educational component is minimal. Almost one setting in eight fails to

meet the minimum standards, while one in four provides good, very good or excellent service.” [2]

Another Quebec-based study showed that wealthier Quebec families had greater access than low-income families to the program—defeating the purpose of helping those who need it. “[Researchers] found that families with incomes between \$25,000 and \$40,000 were worse off financially when the new system came into effect, and this was not offset by the use of subsidized childcare,” reads the report. [3]

Oklahoma has offered all four-year-olds state funded preschool since 1998. [4] Oklahoma’s scores for fourth graders according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) remain low in comparison to other states. [5]

The state of Georgia has had universal preschool since 1993. [6] In 2008 they spent \$325 million on the program; researchers at Georgia State University report positive gains but that these effects were not hugely significant. [7] The researchers write that “[p]re-K participation was associated with more positive outcomes than other preschool experiences on 11 of 16 measures, but the differences were not statistically significant during the first grade.” [8] The study also states that “[b]y the end of first grade, children who did not attend preschool had skills similar to those of Georgia’s preschoolers.” [9]

Finally, a California study published in September 2009 assesses full day kindergarten in Los Angeles, concluding that again, the gains are quite limited. “Full-day kindergarten appears to provide some benefits, but in a small way and only to certain groups of students. Given the cost of implementing full-day kindergarten for schools that may lack space, if educators and policymakers proceed, they must consider whether it should be targeted to selected schools.” [10]

Asking what something costs is valid, in particular when returns are small and difficult to assess. Targeted programs for disadvantaged families where necessary might prove a better solution for Ontario, as might be money in parents’ pockets through a reduced tax burden in the first place.

Endnotes

[1] Mrozek, A. (2009, November). The Cost of a Free Lunch: The real costs of the Pascal early learning plan for Ontario. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Retrieved December 1, 2009 from http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/IMFC-Cost-of-a-free-lunch.pdf

[2] Japel, C., Tremblay, R. E., Côté, S. (2005, December). Quality Counts! Assessing the Quality of Daycare Services Based on the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development, Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy. Vol. 11, no. 5, p. 6. Retrieved December 1, 2009 from <http://www.irpp.org/choices/archive/vol11no5.pdf>

[3] Kozhaya, N. (2006, October). \$7-a-day childcare: Are parents getting what they need? Montreal Economic Institute, Economic Note, p.1. Retrieved December 1, 2009 from http://www.iedm.org/uploaded/pdf/octobre06_en.pdf

[4] Burke, L. (2009, May 14). Does Universal Preschool Improve Learning? Lessons from Georgia and Oklahoma. Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation, p. 6. Retrieved December 1, 2009 from http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/upload/bg_2272.pdf

[5] Bandeira de Mello, V., Blankenship, C., McLaughlin, D., Rahman, T. (2009, October). Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto NAEP Scales: 2005-2007, Research and Development Report. U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved December 2, 2009 from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2010456.pdf>

[6] Burke, p. 6.

[7] Henry, G. et al., (2009, May 6). The Georgia Early Childhood Study: 2001-2004, Georgia State University Andrew Young School of Policy Studies. Retrieved December 2, 2009 from <http://aysps.gsu.edu/publications/2005/EarlyChildhoodReport.pdf>

[8] *Ibid*, pp. vii. See also p. 75: "Pre-K participation was associated with more positive outcomes than other preschool experiences on 11 of 16 measures. However, in no case was the difference statistically significant during the first grade. This is not an assessment of the effectiveness of Georgia Pre-K: children who participated in the Pre-K program gained more skills than they began with relative to the national norms. The growth of skills for these Pre-K children is parallel to the growth of other children, including those in private programs and Head Start. **One way to interpret these findings is that children enrolled in private programs and Head Start, which is almost two times as costly as Georgia Pre-K (Barnett, et al 2004), developed skills at the same rate as children in the Pre-K program.**" (Emphasis added.)

[9] *Ibid*, p. viii.

[10] Cannon, J.S., Jackowitz, A., Painter, G., McConville, S. (2009, September). Full-Day Kindergarten in California: Lessons from Los Angeles. Public Policy Institute of California, p. 3. Retrieved December 1, 2009 from http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_909JCR.pdf