

OTTAWA  CITIZEN

Don't expect Mary Poppins

By Andrea Mrozek, Published April 23, 2010

Lisa MacLeod, MPP for Nepean-Carleton, found out the hard way that Ontario's new all-day kindergarten will be somewhat less flexible than families were led to believe.

Her five-year-old was denied the opportunity to remain in half-day programming, because the school was chosen for full-day kindergarten. Alarming, yes, but not surprising. Province-wide, taxpayer-funded early learning programs spell the end of choice in child care.

The rhetoric says otherwise, to be sure. All-day kindergarten has long been framed as just another choice for parents. Indeed, when Dr. Charles Pascal released his early learning report to Premier Dalton McGuinty in June 2009, it sounded heavenly. Community-based hubs in schools would allow parents to come and go as they wished, in and out of a seamless day of care.

This sort of scenario is about as likely to happen as Mary Poppins ringing your doorbell with an offer to prepare supper. So how exactly is the Ontario Ministry of Education legislating choice out of existence?

For starters, simply by introducing a monolithic taxpayer funded plan -- legitimate and regulated child care providers can't compete. When the government subsidizes a service, it means others are put out of business.

All-day kindergarten also takes five-year-olds out of existing centres. These children are a day-care's bread and butter. Care of five-year-olds is substantially cheaper than infant care, which runs into the tens of thousands of dollars annually. Since no child-care centre could possibly charge parents the true infant price, they have balanced their businesses by charging less than the real cost for younger kids and more for older ones. The older ones who will now enter the "free" state centres.

Families with a spouse who stays home are, as usual, totally pooched. Their taxes will rise for a service they don't ever choose to use. Pascal-plan advocates swear up and down the block we can fund the new system, parents at home and everything in between. The problem is they haven't told anyone where the money tree is growing.

It bears repeating, again and again, just how expensive these programs are. Costed out, the full Pascal plan comes to \$6.1 billion annually. All-day kindergarten rings in at a likely \$1.8 billion annually. If money spent on all-day kindergarten went to parents instead, it would come out to more than \$9,000 per child, annually.

The result? New groups are cropping up to fight all-day kindergarten, two in the last month alone. They are unified on the idea that parents need real choices. Tanya Allen, a Toronto mother of two young children, has just started Parentalchoice.ca, because she's concerned for parents. "I don't want to be forced into using all-day kindergarten," she says. "This program is not only a waste of money, but it also obliterates parents' choice in child care."

Another Toronto-based group just launched Kindergartencredit.ca with former Grade 1 teacher Kate Tennier at the helm. Their goal is to ensure that early education funds are given directly to parents instead. Tennier highlights how the world's top early childhood experts state that for programs to work, parents must be at the heart of the decision-making process.

Families understand budgets in a manner that governments clearly do not. When your money runs out, you understand that it's not the time to book a vacation or add a latté a day. But in the last budget, McGuinty revealed a deficit of \$19.7 billion and introduced new program funding of a billion dollars over five years for all-day kindergarten. Let the deficit rise, especially considering the real cost of all-day kindergarten should see that billion dollars almost double for one year alone.

In the end, the government will be the monopoly provider, giving you one solo choice. They don't delicately tailor programs to meet personal needs. The Disneyland imagery of a better world courtesy of universal early learning programs has got to go -- it's not true in the research, and it's not true in the reality on the ground. The truth is that government is substantially curtailing your choices while spending your money like a drunken sailor, for little to no proven returns.

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