

Daycare plan not for the kids

By Andrea Mrozek

Remember Saturday Night Live's Coffee Talk Lady? Mike Myers played the part, complete with heavy jewellery, heavy make-up and an especially heavy New York accent. The Coffee Talk Lady had a prototype for discussion and it went like this: "The Holy Roman Empire is neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. Discuss."

If only she could take on Charles Pascal's report for Premier Dalton McGuinty about a new, billion-dollar program for seamless early learning and child care. For the plan is neither about early learning, nor care.

Research does not show long-term benefits from institutional care at young ages. There is even some negative evidence that you certainly won't hear about from Pascal or McGuinty -- of increased behavioural problems from more time spent in care.

Further, in polls, many parents say they'd prefer to have a family member care for their young children.

Yet advocates for Pascal's plan, which would see children as young as four spend all day in school, want to have it all ways at once. Why, they say, it's absolutely crucial for learning and school readiness! But it should be voluntary.

The \$1-billion price tag? It will actually save everyone money and offer even greater returns! Plus, the program will help disadvantaged children. No wait, it's for all children. It's for parents, so they can work. It's for kids--to improve their outcomes. It's dizzying.

Never mind that Canadian 15-year-olds rank better internationally than those countries the OECD ranks high for early learning and child care, this according to a 2006 OECD report .

Charles Pascal and his allies are busy propagating the notion that we are very much behind -- meanwhile, our kids forge ahead.

Theoretically, this plan is to help families. Sounds good, but in practice, it will encourage parents to drop off their youngest children for long days while they work. All this is based on untested theories, backed up by wishful thinking, not sound research.

Actually, the "research" section in Pascal's 65-page report is so short, at three pages, as to be laughable.

Pascal appears to subscribe to the presumptions that every child is possibly at risk and every parent possibly lacklustre, hence the universal nature of the program.

But for many conscientious parents -- unsure of what the research actually says -- this represents nothing but more pressure.

You want your children to be "school ready" and this is the way to achieve it, right? By having them spend the better part of the day away from you and your values, right?

Well, no, actually, it isn't. And that's without considering increased taxes to support a new infrastructure for unionized staff, which could well lead to labour disputes and strikes. And a full new division of bureaucracy--new salaries--in the Ministry of Education to oversee the program.

In short, it's not your children who are benefiting from this.

The Coffee Talk lady would be all "verklempt," as Myers used to say. Ontario parents should be too--and make their voices heard at Queen's Park.

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