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It's not the time to embark on all-day kindergarten classes

Andrea Mrozek – Published May 12, 2010

Snip, snip, snip. That's the sound of education cutbacks. You've likely heard already: Teachers, snip. Program costs, snip. Infrastructure repairs, music -- snip, snip. It's not that education funding has been decreased, quite the opposite. Boards just can't seem to balance the books.

Enter an idea only a bureaucrat could love: The expansion of a strained system to include all-day kindergarten. And for what? Benefits of all-day kindergarten over the long term are nil.

Clearly families understand budgeting in a manner that governments do not. When your books are in the red, it's not the time to embark on a cruise liner for an expensive destination. In Ontario, costs started rising from the moment all-day kindergarten was announced -- initially set at \$1 billion, estimates rose quickly to \$1.5 billion. Our own research says the program will ring in at \$1.8 billion annually.

Ditto in Quebec, where costs have risen 850 per cent since the province embarked on the journey of universal child care in 1995. British Columbians can expect the same. The B.C. budget is ramping up to \$129 million annually for all-day kindergarten by 2012 -- a substantial number, but certainly not enough to do a universal program with any level of quality.

It's not a program worth doing at all, of course. Why? First, and most importantly, the benefits for all children, so highly touted and widely reported, just don't exist. The research shows benefits for targeted (read small) populations of disadvantaged students -- not the entire province. Research showing lasting benefits also included time with mothers. So often we hear of benefits of institutional care -- slightly higher test scores or wider vocabularies.

But the most rigorous longitudinal research says high-quality care is most often found with grandparents and dads, and least often in daycare. Only very rarely do we hear of the coupled findings in the same research that show increased aggression in kids, for example. Still, many effects of full-time care, whether positive or negative disappear over time.

Secondly, parents were not consulted. Consultations on the all-day kindergarten program were done largely through the summer of 2008 and parents were not notified, says Helen Ward, president of Kids First Canada, a grassroots group advocating against all-day kindergarten.

"Parents were never asked because it's not about what parents and children need or want," she says. "It's about what the World Bank and the unions demand: Ramp up the rat race."

She's concerned that higher taxes subsidizing institutional care means parents are being forced to spend less time with their children as parents. Polls show most parents ideally prefer to have a parent or family member care for their kids; therefore it stands to reason that government policies should support real choice for families, she adds.

The money spent on child care programs would certainly be more efficiently spent in the hands of parents. If parents in Ontario received the dollars to be spent on all-day kindergarten, it would amount to \$9,000 per child, annually. Of course, the question remains whether today's deficits, increased health care costs and the aging population allow for any such spending at all.

But put that niggling question out of your mind. Government officials certainly have. Today's budget deficit in British Columbia is \$1.7 billion. In spite of funding increases, fewer children and a shortened school year, the Vancouver school board is running a \$17-million deficit. Other boards, such as Burnaby and Abbotsford, face the same dilemma.

"The 19th century is gone," writes Bruce Fuller, the author of *Standardized Childhood*. Fuller's point is that the era of institution-building and mass organizations is over and that the early years are not particularly well suited to conforming to monolithic, one-size-fits-all structures.

But if he's right, someone forgot to tell the government. Truly, there's nothing bureaucrats won't do "for the children."

In this case, it's teaching them hard lessons about taxing and profligate spending. Better get the classrooms equipped with texts on budgets, deficits and inflation.

Parents might chalk it up to early learning, albeit a form they weren't quite expecting.