



Study the real costs of all-day kindergarten

Thursday, January 10, 2008
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Charles Pascal was recently appointed special advisor to Premier Dalton McGuinty, to help make the successful transition to full-day kindergarten in Ontario. This plan is being touted as a great stride forward for our children.

It's a claim that needs to be examined more fully.

First of all, the evidence that shows early learning is important does not show that centre or school-based care is automatically better than other forms of care -- parents, grandparents or nannies, for example.

Second, behind the rhetoric, we now learn the government's expansion of the school system to full-day kindergarten is, to McGuinty and Pascal at least, a poverty reduction strategy.

Pascal, in a recent interview with Steve Paikin on TVO, said "...the government is also taking on the 'P' word." (That's "P" for poverty, in case you missed it.)

"When's the last time the Ontario government took on poverty reduction, and the issues of child care and the issues of full-day junior and senior kindergarten?" he asked rhetorically.

"This is about connectivity. This is a poverty reduction strategy as well."

Perhaps because early learning and poverty reduction are parallel goals, Pascal cited a study which did not actually show the benefits of early learning for the general population.

Pascal cited the Perry Preschool project, which began in Ypsilanti, Michigan in 1962.

That was a uniquely-crafted, small-scale program for black children living in poverty, designed to raise the children's IQs. This was enriched learning in optimum conditions: The children were in half-a-day of care, and the program included an hour-and-a-half per week of parent education in the home.

The child-staff ratio was less than six-to-one, and the cost estimates in 2000 dollars were about \$15,000 US, per student.

Tracking the children over decades, it appeared Perry graduates were more likely to have finished school, less likely to have been arrested and the girls had fewer teen pregnancies.

But when educators say Perry kids were 20% more likely to have graduated from school, due to the small study size that means we're actually talking about 10 additional children.

NOT STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT

Other findings proved not to be statistically significant, or applied only to girls and not boys.

In short, this is not a study relevant to the implementation of a program for all of Ontario's four-year-olds.

Full-day kindergarten in Ontario is not going to be a small-scale program. Census data shows Ontario has 670,770 children under age 5. Let's estimate a fifth of those are age 4, and ready to enrol.

That's more than 130,000 children. At Perry Preschool prices of \$15,000 per child, that would mean the government should allot close to \$2 billion dollars annually for full-day kindergarten.

But McGuinty's stated funding for his new venture is "\$200 million in year three of its mandate and \$300 million in year four," according to the press release.

This raises questions about how many kids will be packed into one classroom -- not exactly a hallmark of quality early learning.

And if McGuinty was ever to go with a cost of \$2 billion annually, that would raise major questions about the impact on our tax bills.

Poverty reduction may be a good reason to implement a government policy.

Not, however, when the premier is justifying the program on quite different grounds to parents, many of whom believe full-day kindergarten is actually all about improving early learning.

Good child care is an investment and early learning is important. So is poverty reduction.

LEGITIMATE QUESTION

But it's not at all clear government strategy should arbitrarily combine the two.

When it does, it's legitimate for taxpayers to ask what the added costs will be to them.

That's precisely the question parents should be asking now, even as the price tag for quality full-day, publicly-funded care rises, and potentially, their taxes along with it.