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McGuinty's folly rides our school buses

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By Peter Shawn Taylor

Last week, three-year-old Aryn Humby's school bus dropped him off at the wrong stop in Kitchener on his way home from junior kindergarten, much to the concern of his parents.

The event made the front page of The Record last Friday. The school board and bus company both said they'll review the situation.

To ensure such a thing never happens again a Record editorial - breathlessly titled "Danger rides our school buses" - advocated adult supervisors for every bus and/or wireless electronic tracking devices for each student. What's needed, the editorial board thundered, is "an extra layer of security."

Then again, maybe we just need to cut down on three-year-olds riding school buses.

I'm not going to quibble with the honest fright Aryn's parents must have felt throughout the ordeal. Truth be told, on my first day of Grade 1 a teacher put me on the wrong school bus and I ended up at a roadside diner while my Mom panicked at home. (It never made the papers.)

I'm also not going to let the school board or bus company off the hook for failing to follow necessary protocols. Busing kids is an important job and they need to ensure they don't screw it up.

But any logical, detached inquiry into the situation must inevitably lead to some uncomfortable, elephant-sized questions like: Why are we putting three-year-olds on school buses in the first place? And if they're too young to ride the bus alone, is it really a good idea to make someone that age go to school all day?

Ontario's current rollout of full-day kindergarten (Aryn's school moves to an all-day program next year) needs to be properly recognized as misguided, unproductive and entirely unaffordable. And the blame here lies squarely with Premier Dalton McGuinty.

"Does it make sense to send a three-year-old off to school all day?" asks Andrea Mrozek, manager of research and communications at the Ottawa-based Institute for Marriage and Family Canada. "The obvious answer is no and a whole lot of research supports this point of view."

Mrozek has compiled a wealth of information casting doubt on the benefits of full-day kindergarten and universal child care. In particular she highlights the work of Canadian developmental psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld in emphasizing the need for young children to form attachment bonds at home or in a family setting before being packed off to a crowded institution.

"Children need to develop their own tiny little personalities in a safe environment with someone who knows them and loves," she observes.

Neufeld's work suggests there are no behavioural benefits to institutionalizing children prior to the age of five. In fact, early schooling of this sort may lead to the unpleasant situation of children forming attachment bonds with peers instead of parents.

Of course, full-day kindergarten may provide an important benefit to parents who want or need to work. But we shouldn't confuse what's necessary for some parents with what's good for all kids.

This brings up another problem with full-day junior kindergarten plans - the deceit of universality. A major argument in favour of all-day schooling for young children, at least according to the influential 2009 report by Dr. Charles Pascal for the McGuinty government, is that universal early learning is the best investment any government can make.

Pascal provides ample citations, including the work of Nobel laureate economist James Heckman, to claim \$1 spent on all children at a young age provides impressive rates of return of between \$7 and \$17 in the future. This supposedly comes in the form of reduced welfare, legal and health costs when the children grow up.

But a closer look at the evidence shows Pascal has seriously misrepresented the true nature of any future benefits. Heckman's work on early educational interventions is clearly based on programs aimed at what he calls "severely disadvantaged children." Further he points out "it is foolish to try to substitute for what middle-class and upper middle class parents are already doing."

Creating a massive new government program that puts every four- and five-year-old (and a substantial number of three-year-olds, depending on their birthdays) into school for a whole day is certainly not what Heckman advocates. In fact, he argues it's a waste of time and money because it takes many well-adjusted kids away from their parents.

Another of Pascal's favourite pieces of evidence is the famous Perry Preschool experiment from Ypsilanti, Michigan in the 1960s, which targeted a small number of very poor black children with below-average IQs.

Again, these results have no applicability to a program that ensnares every kid in Ontario.

Finally, beyond all the pedagogical and behavioural arguments against Ontario's full-day kindergarten program, the simple fact is we can't afford it.

The recent Drummond report's most important recommendation is to scrap the \$1.5-billion project because it's far too expensive.

McGuinty has ignored this advice, of course. And the price for protecting his cherished but unnecessary program has turned out to be his current contract battle with Ontario teachers.

Want to keep kids safe and happy and leave the rest of us better off? Get rid of full-day kindergarten.

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