



Questions about kindergarten plan

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By Wendy Teed

Having read The Spectator's Jan. 13 article, Full-day kindergarten coming soon, I present the following questions for consideration.

1. How can shifting from a class-size "cap" of 20 to an average of 26 children in one room be considered a positive step toward the future?
2. How can an alteration in ratios be seen as a "pro" argument for full-day learning when the change is from 1:8 or 1:10 (depending upon the composition of children) in a licensed day-care setting to 1:13 in a school environment?
3. How can managing a group size of an "average" of 26 JK/SK's be preferable to a maximum group size (as per The Day Nurseries Act) of 16 or 24 (again depending upon the composition of children present)?
4. How can anyone realistically expect children, some as young as three years of age, to function optimally in a JK/SK program in a school environment five days per week when many who currently attend alternate full days (I witness this on a daily basis in my Child Care operation) are exhausted at the end of every school day? (One mother quoted in The Spectator article describes her JK Child as "wiped").
5. How can the implementation of this new system "make life easier for busy parents," as Premier Dalton McGuinty says when:
 - * Child-care services will only be provided for 188 days out of the year? "For the province to limit extended-day programming to just 188 (actual school days) makes no sense at all" (Petr Varmuza, Toronto Children's Services manager).
 - * Parents of children who are bused and do not wish their child to attend full-day programming will now be responsible for their child's "own travel arrangements?" (This according to Michelle Despault, spokesperson for Kathleen Wynne, then Minister of Education.)
 - * Parents are being given a "ballpark" figure for extended programming of \$ 15 to \$ 25 per day which amounts to \$ 324.75 to \$541.25 monthly? How can families accurately budget with these varying figures?

6. How can embarking upon this system change, which will cost taxpayers millions of dollars -- be implemented in a year that has a projected "unprecedented deficit" of 24.7 billion?
7. Why should taxpayers spend millions to retrofit schools when there are early learning spaces already in place in child-care centres throughout Ontario?
8. Why is the Ministry of Education adamant that school boards run extended programming, rather than "partner" with current child-care services when a number of school board representatives have said they are not pleased with overseeing this aspect of the system? Bill Tucker, director of education of the Thames Valley District School Board, said: "Local communities should be able to partner with local child-care providers."
9. How can this system increase the number of employed Early Childhood Educators in this Province (McGuinty is quoted as stating that "the program will require the hiring of more than 20,000 new early childhood educators over the next five years") when its very existence will result in the closing down of many current child-care services? Elizabeth Witmer, Conservative education critic, states: "This will be putting businesses out of business" and Thames Valley's Tucker says "principals will be forced into the business of day care and spending money to duplicate a service that already exists."
10. Why does Dr. Charles Pascal automatically assume that elementary school teachers and early childhood educators will "... play nice in the sandbox together," given the historic "divide" between these two professional disciplines, coupled with the fact that their specific roles within the classroom have not been delineated?
11. Why does Premier Dalton McGuinty state that "the program will give kids a better chance of finishing high school, getting a post-secondary education, and landing a good job?"

It is mind-boggling that anyone, let alone the Premier of our province, would assume that putting children as young as three years of age in a school setting, five days per week, will yield such amazing, positive results. The most recent, associated research indicates the apparent initial advantages provided by such programming weaken over time with the debate being whether they dwindle "all the way to zero, or merely to near-insignificance" (National Post, Oct. 29).

Toronto trustee, Irene Atkinson aptly states: "My personal feeling is that this is the most ill-conceived program I've ever encountered."

Jim Wibberley, director of education of the Grand Erie District School Board, remarks: "we have very little information about how this is going to work."

Shaun Elliott, chief executive of the Western Ontario YMCA, says, "Why not take advantage of child-care providers who have been doing it for years?"

The Institute of Marriage and Family Canada emphatically states, in a report entitled: *The Cost Of A Free Lunch, The Real Costs Of The Pascal Early Learning Plan For Ontario*, "We recommend abandoning this expensive system."

But in the end, I fear that the Province of Ontario will unfortunately most likely follow the lead of its Premier who has been quoted as saying: "As my old man used to say, the best way to begin is to begin. So we're going to begin."

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