

Full-day kindergarten no treat for kids



Hamilton Spectator File Photo

The level of verbal interaction between child and adult is considered a crucial factor in the development of the young.

Sorry outcome foreseen in Ontario Liberals' proposal to double length of school day for youngsters

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Overshadowed by the faith-based school issue is the Ontario Liberals' proposal to double the length of the school day for three-, four- and five-year-olds. Current half-day programs for junior and senior kindergarten children would turn into full-day programs September 2011.

"Free" full-day kindergarten will mean that the parents of kids formerly in day care will save money as their children would move from fee-charging institutions to publicly funded schools. A cynic might think this a ploy to garner votes from cash strapped young parents.

However, motives are not the problem. Outcomes are.

This "day care through the back door" by the McGuinty government is no zero-sum game for the kindergarten children who suddenly find themselves spending more time in school.

The reason is that the Ministry of Children and Youth Services' regulations governing daycares are far more stringent than those laid out in the Ontario Education Act. Nowhere is that difference more pronounced than in the rules outlining the numbers and qualifications of the adults working with these kids.

The Day Nurseries Act mandates that two-and-a-half to five-year-olds in day care have a maximum ratio of eight children to every one adult. In the school system, while legislation has been introduced to cap primary class sizes at 20, there are no requirements to reduce the child-to-adult ratio, meaning that there can be as many as 20 children per one adult. Moving kids from day care into the school system more than doubles the child-to-adult ratio.

Class size is subject to the vagaries of politics, fluctuating wildly from government to government. Worse, "official" class sizes have a notorious disconnect from reality: the last time class reductions were brought in during the late 1980s, I had 29 six-year-olds in my Grade 1 class while the averages presented to the public were 22. Indeed, my colleagues and I used to marvel at how routinely so many of our students vapourized on their way to being counted for the official record.

As for the adults who are with these kids, once again the stricter requirements of the Day Nursery Act mean that at least one adult in a day care must have an Early Childhood Education diploma, whereas Ontario's Education Act allows for teachers with qualifications in one division to teach children in a completely different age group. Grade 6 teachers with little to no experience working with young children can legally find themselves teaching junior kindergarten the next year.

Indeed, there are tales of woefully unqualified - and inexperienced - teachers being placed with very young children. One story involves a halftime administrator who was slotted to fill her other half-day in junior kindergarten. Because she did not know that four-year-olds shouldn't walk home alone, parents returned to the school on the first day to find their children wandering around the parking lot after being dismissed for the lunchtime bell.

We also can't forget the 85 per cent of Ontario's children under the age of six who currently spend their non-kindergarten hours with a parent or in home-based care, many participating in the province's popular and well-attended Early Years Centres. These children would be moved from child-to-adult ratios of five-to-one or even one-to-one to the vastly inferior ratios permitted by the school system.

Ratio is crucial to early childhood development. In March of this year, the American National Institute of Child Health and Human Development released their latest report on the longitudinal effects of early childcare. Not surprisingly, it found that the level of verbal interaction between adult and child was a crucial factor in determining future growth, noting that "this finding was consistent with other evidence indicating that children with greater early exposure to adult language were themselves more likely to score higher on measures of language development."

Undoubtedly there are children in home-based situations where the level of verbal interaction is not strong but, contrary to propagated myth, this is nowhere near the norm.

So, when the bulk of young children are suddenly thrust into a school environment with a child-adult ratio two times, five times or even 20 times worse than what they previously experienced, opportunities for them to engage in the dynamic and individualized dialogue necessary for cognitive growth are greatly reduced.

While the McGuinty Liberals claim this to be "early learning," not day care, Ontarians would be wise to take a closer look at the Liberals' costing summary. Alone among the Liberals' education proposals, this one is discussed in the context of a "social service" and is not listed under "Smarter Ontario" but under "Stronger Ontario." We might ask why costing for kindergarten is grouped in with an "Economic Development Fund" and "Helping our Tourism Industry."

McGuinty has expressed a desire to be known as the Education Premier. Promising to reduce child-adult ratios for these young students and becoming a little more forthcoming about his reasons for offering all-day kindergarten would be a good first step.

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