

Tennier and Ward. More school isn't always better

The drive for full-time kindergarten is based on the idea that it's better for children and necessary for parents -- wrong on both counts

Kate Tennier and Helen Ward, Citizen Special

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"Conventional wisdom," a term coined by the late economist John Kenneth Galbraith, describes the phenomenon whereby information, regardless of its origin, gets repeated so often that it becomes part of a society's core belief system.

The Ontario Liberal government seems to be moving ahead on its proposal that current half-day kindergarten programs become full-day, pushing "early learning" back into the news along with the conventional thinking that more schooling is better for young kids and that the majority of families need full-time school for the purposes of day care. The most dangerous aspect of this conventional wisdom though is that it silences the real story.

It is hard for people to understand, but there truly is no long-term research showing that more schooling for little kids is a good thing. Short-term research is mixed and definitely shows drawbacks.



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Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty has pledged to begin phasing in full-day kindergarten by 2010.

The multi-billion-dollar Head Start program in the United States, over four decades in the running, has had no discernible positive impact on poor black children, one of its main target groups. A multi-million-dollar assessment of Sure Start, a similar program in Britain, actually found that children of teen mothers had poorer outcomes with the program.

The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Centre at the University of London cautions researchers against using routinely cited studies, such as those of the Perry Preschool Project, as a basis for policy: positive outcomes for small, expensive, parent-involved experimental projects involving very underprivileged children are simply not broadly applicable.

And, in his just-published book, *Standardized Childhood*, Bruce Fuller, a professor of education and public policy at the University of California, cites findings very relevant to this proposed increase in Ontario's kindergarten hours: Moving children from 15 hours per week of pre-school to 30 not only provides little in cognitive benefits but, "the slowdown in social-emotional development, which has even been detected for children attending preschool for 15 hours, doubled in magnitude for children spending 30 hours or more per week in a preschool center."

In Sweden, day cares were put under education authorities in 1998. Its education ministry reported in 2004 that, "the proportion of children being defined as in need of special support has increased in many municipalities, especially in large urban areas." Their most troubling explanation is that the accepted range of what is considered normal development may have shrunk so dramatically that "problems" are now being detected where previously none existed.

This move to standardize children, this "pathologizing" of all but the most normative development, is an alarming aspect of this push to impose organized education on younger and younger children.

The second myth propelling full-day kindergarten is the "need for more day care" argument. It has become conventional wisdom that 75 per cent of mothers are working and therefore need day care.

Seventy-five per cent of mothers are not "working"; rather they are in the "labour force," an entirely different thing. As defined by Statistics Canada, it includes not just those in full-time paid jobs outside the home, but any who are employed or unemployed. Thus it counts mothers on paid or unpaid leave, doing paid work from home, or doing unpaid work in family businesses. Those doing any amount of paid work part-time, or just looking for a job also get counted.

OECD data show that the majority of mothers are either not in the labour force at all, or are "employed" but on leave or in part-time jobs. Even these facts do not reflect the reality that many mothers choose home-based paid work, evening or weekend jobs, or that the father -- or an extended family member -- is the preferred care provider

One rationale for moving three-, four- and five-year-olds into full-time schooling is that it will free up day-care spots for younger children, including infants. But, along with these

labour force statistics, the fact that 90 per cent of parents strongly prefer parental or home-based child care over that of centre-based care and that currently less than 11 per cent of Ontario's youngsters are actually in day-care centres, demonstrates that this thinking is ill-informed.

Galbraith said that, "the enemy of conventional wisdom is not ideas but the march of events."

With child care, the Swedes are the canaries in the coal mine, so we would be wise to learn from their experience. Along with discovering the pitfalls of too-early schooling, that country is abandoning its policy of not funding parental care, largely due to the growing movement of parent activists. Starting in 2008, after decades of funding "day care only" for one- to three-year-olds, parents who opt to care for their own children will receive close to \$7,500 (Canadian) per year per child, even if they choose to continue doing some paid work.

In 1966, the famed U.S. sociologist James Coleman in his iconic *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, laid bare the myth that school expenditure and outside professional input were more critical to student success than the home life of the child, a finding that researchers still hold to be true.

Therefore, the best chance for success for all children is to empower parents to develop a culture of learning in each and every family. And, instead of relying upon flawed "conventional wisdom," we would be far better off if the real wisdom inherent in so many Canadians served as our guide.

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