

Pain and Gain for Early Learning in Budget 2012

Ontario Budget 2012 makes no overt changes to early learning. Full day kindergarten moves forward as planned to embrace all children by 2014. Its unique educator team remains intact. The Government should be commended for rejecting the narrow mindedness of Drummond's recommendations.

The back-story however has some twists. A \$75-million reduction in education capital grants will crash into the need to build or refurbish classrooms in schools where there is no space for the remaining influx of 100,000 children during the final phase of the rollout.

Most early childhood educators in kindergarten classrooms do not yet work under a collective agreement. Public sector wage controls leaves them, and new all ECE entrants, immobilized at the starting gate. In a tense labour environment the flexibility to bargain working conditions to create the atmosphere necessary for a successful educator team is less likely. Education funding caps erode the potential of schools softening the enhanced hardships of child poverty inherent during a welfare and benefit freeze.

Not to venture too far into Hades but grants below inflation for colleges and universities won't play well for soft programs. Expect renewed pressure on the few remaining lab schools operated by early childhood departments.

The elephant in the room is of course childcare, unmentioned in word or by print. In pre-budget treatises stakeholders petitioned for between \$180- and \$257-million to stabilize programs affected by potential client loss due to full day kindergarten. Advocates emerged from budget lock-ups in shock repeating predictions of mass program closures.

A more sober examination reveals centre closings due to full day kindergarten have been few to date. Many programs are in trouble but the source is empty, and therefore unfunded, spaces due to rising unemployment and a dearth of childcare fee subsidies. An outmoded funding mechanism holds childcare to its welfare-market roots, regardless of which ministry it resides in. Full day kindergarten doesn't alter this, nor would the underlying dysfunction have been address by a cash infusion alone.

Now what? Our Best Future in Mind, the 2009 blueprint for full day early learning, still contains the solution. Base funding six hours a day, 188 days a year of educational care for every kindergarten-aged children, frees up money now spent on staff wage grants and reduces the need for fee subsidies for the 35 per cent of this age group now attending child care. Conservative estimates put province-wide savings at \$160-million; an amount in range of advocates' demands.

To realize the savings, service delivery must also be rationalized. This is why the report named school boards responsible for the full day, year round education and care of kindergarten and school-aged children, while municipal systems managers retained the saving to reorganize the delivery of child care and family supports to younger children and families. Without realignment, any savings are squandered maintaining the service silos.

The irony is the childcare lobby fought so vociferously against a plan that could now be its savior. It successfully amended the new early learning legislation to maintain the mishmash of service providers. Any school board attempting to take responsibility for extended day programming was met with an organized assault motivated by the self-interested protectionism of large agencies.

The lobby has successfully preserved mixed service delivery. Thus fragmentation ensues; access for the under fours will certainly contract. Some ECEs will have jobs with school boards; others will work in

schools, topping and tailing the school day but be employed by outside operators. For-profit childcare - corporate style - will further intrude.

Instead of money the operators will be offered a ‘modernized’ Day Nurseries Act, centred on an increase in child/staff ratios and decrease in oversight. The Education Act still requires boards to provide out of school care where parent demand is sufficient. A legislated customer base, combined with loosened standards, will be enough for the largest operators to emerge with a stronger market share. They will pick up some of the failing stand-alone programs, pin down exclusive contracts with school boards, focus expansion in schools with catchments of parents able to handle the fees and continue to chip away at any attempts to expand public delivery.

Subsidy wait lists will grow, quality will slide and good job prospects for ECEs will wither but pain for some can still be a gain for others. Before the chaos reaches a crescendo the Minister might signal she is taking control. A new framework for childcare, linking it to education and out of market anarchy is still doable—take a look at what PEI has accomplished in a short timeframe. Rather than leaving the spoils to the survivors, systemic provincial/municipal/community planning backed by respectful communication—until now sorely lacking—would go a long way.

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