

Did we Elect McGuinty or Drummond?

In 2007 the newly re-elected Premier Dalton McGuinty asked former deputy minister Charles Pascal to look into the best way to implement full day kindergarten for all Ontario four-and five-year-olds. Fast forward five years and another appointee, this time former banker Don Drummond, is being asked what to eliminate from the budget to ensure Ontario stays on track to eradicate a \$16-billion deficit.

Top Liberals are being ruthless signaling the provincial budget will proceed with previously announced corporate tax breaks while requiring ministries to cut up to 30 per cent of their costs. 'Bear the pain for future gain' is the current mantra but there won't be much pain sharing. Program cuts tend to disproportionately affect the vulnerable while tax increases are shared across the economic strata. Finding cheaper ways of delivering full time kindergarten, or eliminating it altogether have been floated in the media. As Pascal told CBC radio, "There are two kinds of policy making—smart and dumb. And cutting full day kindergarten is definitely dumb."

Liberal MPPs were quick to point out that Drummond's suggestions are only recommendations that the province can act on or not. "They will be recommendations and observations for the government to consider," said Niagara area MP Jim Bradley.

The Liberals would take a political hit for back tracking. Responding to public push back, the Tories did a quick switch on their threats to eliminate full day kindergarten prior to the election. But the Liberals do have other options. They can slow down the roll out until brighter economic days arrive. Responding to reports of shortages of early childhood educators and teacher surpluses they may dispense with the teaching team and go for slightly smaller classes taught solo by a teacher. In reality there is no shortage of ECEs—just a shortage of decent jobs for them to work in. Colleges continue to produce 2,500 new grads a year. Half don't work in the field.

Either option would be dumb. Ontario was finally getting it right when it came to improving the life chances of young children and it has much to do to bridge the equity gap for our youngest. At the moment, 27 per cent of Ontario students enter Grade 1 with significant educational deficits compared to their peers, and a great many will never catch up.

Many studies have shown it's much more efficient to invest early in a student's life than to try to intervene later. Pascal's report and an earlier report, *Ontario in the Creative Age*, by Roger Martin and Richard Florida, described early childhood development as "the highest payoff investment we can make in our long-run prosperity."

If numbers are the only things Mr. McGuinty listens to these days he needs to hear that early education is an economic stimulus package that keeps on giving. We are also seeing early evidence that full day kindergarten is showing big dividends for student achievement.

The findings of the Pascal report were expanded on in the *Early Years Study 3*. As someone who worked on both reports I can say that based on all the evidence we saw, nothing else emerged as a greater driver of children's success. It equalized social class, it equalized equity issues, and it made it easier for all kids to learn better. In terms of public policy, there couldn't be a smarter idea.

— Kerry McCuaig, Atkinson Fellow in Early Childhood Policy