

Behind the child care bidding game

The bidding for child care in the Ontario election campaign started at \$269-million with the Liberals, dropped to \$100-million by the NDP and vanished by the time it got to the Tories. Surprisingly advocates don't ask the NDP leader why she killed the budget to come back with \$169-million less than what was initially on the table.

Then along comes the *Toronto Star* to editorialize that Ontario needs a good child care strategy (May 13) and lists all the reasons why. The evidence may be strong but even when delivered by editors and bankers is not going to shake the opposition of those who equate kids and dogs: If you can't afford one, don't have one.

Perhaps it's time for advocates to put all the good evidence for child care aside for a moment to develop some consensus on how kids might actually get child care. Creating child care and keeping it is about more than bidding up the money. How the money is spent is equally important.

Ontario does need a good child care strategy and fortunately it has one. Titled *With Our Best Future in Mind*, it is behind 264,000 youngsters attending a full day of early learning in kindergarten classes across the province, and it has created 20,000 good paying jobs for early childhood educators. The province choked on putting all its recommendations in place but a few regions took up the challenge and the evidence to date says it works.

School boards in Kitchener-Waterloo and Ottawa now operate 4,200 and 7,000 new full time child-care spaces respectively. Schools open as early as 6:30 a.m. and remain open until 6 p.m. If parents want care, they get it. Wait times for a daycare spot have evaporated.

It is smart public policy using the assets Ontarians already own in their publicly funded schools; ending the double billing needed to run two parallel services — school and daycare — for the same children. This divide plays out in so many bizarre and obstructionist ways. Long-time advocates, sound very Tory-like, when they condemn the \$1.5-billion going to early learning offered by schools to cheer the \$100-million on offer by the NDP.

Meanwhile by merging the administration of education and care, parents in KW and Ottawa are paying less while early childhood educators are earning more. Since parent fees cover the entire cost for the out of school hours, this huge expansion has come about without any increase in school budgets. The money and space that had been used for the daycare of part-time kindergarten children has been repurposed to expand child care for the under 3s. This is where new public money could really make a difference, expanding child care for the hard to serve youngest children instead of propping up failing agencies.

By comparison, Toronto school boards continue to rely on community daycare to address the needs of their students. With over 10 times the number of children as the Kitchener-Waterloo region, Toronto has added only 174 school-aged spaces since 2010, while KW created over 4,000 spaces and counting. KW has no wait list for child care. Toronto's is 20,000 deep.



Advocates could champion the successes in Waterloo and Ottawa and demand the new premier require every board to follow suit. Multiply the child care potential in all 72 school boards across Ontario and the math says tens of thousands of youngsters could have quality care now. Now that's a strategy, but are advocates willing to give up the bidding game?

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