

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Margaret Wente

## All-day kindergarten is not the magic bullet

The benefits of early childhood education are less than advocates claim



[Margaret Wente](#)

Monday, Jun. 15, 2009 06:54PM EDT

---

Who could possibly argue against more kindergarten for our kids? Not me. You might as well denounce apple sauce and motherhood. Kindergarten is a lot of fun, not to mention a safe, convenient place for mom and dad to stash the kids while they go to work.

But is all-day kindergarten the panacea for all our social ills?

Dalton McGuinty thinks so. Ontario's Premier is so convinced that he has pledged untold amounts of money (from where, he doesn't say) to begin expanding kindergarten to every four- and five-year-old in the province. Ultimately, the idea is to create a "seamless" merger of child care and early childhood education, with elementary schools acting as year-round hubs for children from birth to age 12.

Charles Pascal, the Premier's kindergarten guru, says the scheme is nothing less than "transformational." More and earlier kindergarten will boost literacy, graduation rates and postsecondary participation while reducing crime, poverty and social inequality. Middle-class parents like it because they think it will give their kids a leg up in life (and be a lot cheaper than day care). Advocates even say all-day kindergarten is essential to equip the province for the rigours of the innovation economy.

Yet, one of the most credible authorities in the field demolishes these claims. James Heckman is a University of Chicago Nobel laureate in economics. He is a strong believer in early intervention, and his work on the subject is routinely cited by Barack Obama's education team. He is also a realist about the evidence. It shows that early childhood education confers no long-term benefit on middle-class kids. Nor, in the form proposed by Mr. McGuinty, does it shrink the gap between the haves and have-nots. "Advocates and supporters of universal preschool often use existing research for purely political purposes," he warns.

Early intervention *can* make a difference with "disadvantaged populations" - but only if it is far more intensive (and expensive) than any public preschool programs now on offer anywhere. Even then, the positive effects are far more limited than advocates claim.

At the root of the debate over pre-K is a critical social problem: the widening divide between middle-class and disadvantaged children. (According to Dr. Heckman, the single most important difference between the two groups is the mother's education level.) "Middle-class children receive massive doses of early enriched environments," he says. "Children from disadvantaged environments do not."

And so the real question is not whether pre-K is a good idea, but what the state can do to make up for a poor family environment. The answer is: not very much. The advantage that kids gain in Head Start, a U.S.

preschool program for low-income kids, disappears quite quickly. The same is true for the advantages gained in every other preschool program. The biggest success story is the famous Perry Preschool Project, conducted in the 1960s, which involved just a handful of children. Dr. Heckman found it produced a 16-per-cent return for every dollar spent - not negligible, but not quite the spectacular results we've been promised. Today, the project would cost something like \$15,000 a child each year.

Lots of people (besides parents) love Mr. McGuinty's new scheme. The daycare lobby loves it because it is really an expansion of free public-sector daycare under another name. Child-care workers love it because they will become school-board employees and their salaries will leap from \$30,000 to \$47,000. That leaves the rest of us, who are being snookered by sincere but false promises.

"Not getting this right means a whole bunch of kids are getting caught up in youth violence, living lives of misery, dropping out of school and ending up unable to participate in society," says Mr. Pascal. I certainly agree with that. Too bad we won't be spending all that money on the kids who really need it.

---

© Copyright 2009 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.