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Liberal school plan unstable

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There couldn't be a better advertisement for private schools than Dalton McGuinty's surprise announcement last week of more money for cash-hungry school boards -- within weeks of the start of school and a provincial election.

There's a price we pay for public schools and it's not just our taxes. It is the cost of the short-term, votes-getting planning and policy that goes along with control of schools by governments that have to try to get themselves elected every four years or so. Some do better than others at protecting schools from the worst effects.

Short-term planning and education of children don't mix well. The overwhelming word on what kids need is stability. Teachers ask for it, too. Even the McGuinty government promised it.

But there's little that's stabilizing when school boards warn for at least two years that they are coming into a cash crunch and then the government pulls a \$309-million rabbit out of its hat at the last minute, as McGuinty announced last week.

That's right. The Education Premier promised his government will hand school boards an extra \$182 million this year and the balance in the second year, on top of the extra \$781 million he's already announced for schools (most of it going towards teacher salary increases and Liberal projects such as smaller primary grade classes). At the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), that amounts to more than a 17% increase in funding since 2002, while enrolment has dropped by nearly 10%.

McGuinty knows money will significantly lower the noise from boards as he heads into an October election. He's already got the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario -- this province's biggest teachers union at 70,000 members -- pledging its support (even while the union is heading into its own campaign to demand even more money from the province, see a billboard near you) in a drag-out fight to keep Education Minister Kathleen Wynne in her Don Valley West seat against Conservative leader John Tory.

Funnily enough, McGuinty's funding announcement and the union pledge came on the same day.

McGuinty's announcement will exactly cancel the \$21-million deficit at the particularly vocal TDSB for the coming school year -- though do nothing to deal with a \$45-million deficit the next and nothing to deal with the fact the board keeps raiding critical building maintenance funds to pay for its overspending. But when

you live in a short-term world, who cares?

And who wants to make a bet that, after watching last week's funding announcement, TDSB trustees won't just add to their deficit next year, seeing as the government strides in to cover their shortfalls at the last minute anyway? The Liberals did it once before, giving it a quiet \$55-million bailout nobody else got in 2004/05.

There will be those who argue there are plenty of fly-by-night private schools that open one year only to close abruptly a few years down the road. That's right. But "caveat emptor" operates regardless of what school a parent sends their kid to -- just ask any real estate agent. There are also plenty of longstanding private schools, and not just the most elite, that deliver on their education promises year after year.

The point is not that private schools are better. The point is if government keeps making public schools into political footballs, the most discerning and financially-equipped parents will look around for an alternative they can count on, instead of watching their kids get bounced around from one government mandate to the next.

All parties guilty

Governments of all stripes have been guilty -- we got high school destreaming with the NDP, poorly-introduced curriculum changes from the Conservatives and now smaller primary class sizes with the Liberals resulting in bulging upper grades and split grade classes.

They say consistency is part of good parenting. Public education would be better off if government heeded that message too.