

Alberta government pressed to deliver on full-day kindergarten pledge ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Kindergarten teacher Christa Primas gently passes the classroom “talking stick” around the circle of sitting students — encouraging, inspiring and thanking them for sharing the all-important, sweet stories of their daily lives.

“She is so lucky to have you as a friend,” she replies to one. “That will be such an amazing adventure,” she adds to another. “Come up closer to me, buddy, I miss you when you’re far away,” she motions to a slightly squirmy boy.

It’s another magical morning at Penbrooke Meadows School’s full-day kindergarten program. And this well-behaved, completely motivated and hard-working group of 24 children is wide-eyed and eager to absorb the critical skills that will set the foundation for their academic futures.

But, most importantly, they will have all day to do it.

“The fact that I have so much time, the entire day, to work with these kids makes such a huge difference in their development,” Primas says. “We can do so much more, I really get to know them, understand their specific needs and go so much deeper in their learning. That’s a huge advantage for all of them.”

Students in this unique classroom are an array of complexities, becoming ever more common in public schools across Alberta.

Many are from low-income families, others are immigrants, newcomers from wartorn countries, while others just struggle with basic language, fine motor skills or behavioural issues.

But as the province struggles with languishing oil prices, and the resultant unrelenting economic downturn, families are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. And provincial ministries such as primary education continue to face serious funding challenges.

At the same time, Calgary schools have welcomed nearly 1,500 students from refugee families over the past two years, stretching resources for language learning and trauma counselling for kids from wartorn regions.

Demands for in-school nutrition programs is also skyrocketing, with up to one-third of Calgary schools now receiving single-meal supports from the Calgary Food Bank and other local agencies, getting either breakfast or lunches delivered to students whose parents can’t provide those meals at home.

The result is an increasingly complex classroom where teachers and administrators are struggling to meet a growing number of complex needs.

But a big step toward a solution, say early childhood education experts, is full-day kindergarten.

Primas, who’s been teaching kindergarten with the Calgary Board of Education for nearly two decades, says it is the earliest years in a child’s education that are the most meaningful, setting a critical foundation for literacy and numeracy, problem solving, fine motor skills and, most importantly, the confidence they need to enjoy school and love learning.

“If you only have the morning, a couple of hours really, before you can even get going on so many of these things, they are gone, they are gone for the day.

“But when they have the advantage of a full day, I really believe they can learn and benefit so much more.”

Cynthia Prasow, a research scholar in early childhood education at the University of Calgary’s Werklund School of Education, is adamant that full-day kindergarten has huge benefits and it’s time the province make the program mandatory.

“The problem is that kindergarten isn’t even mandatory in Alberta — you don’t even have to go. What we need is mandatory kindergarten that is also full-day. There are so many benefits.”

Prasow was part of an academic team that presented a position paper to the province proposing full-day kindergarten, concluding after much research that students enrolled in full-day programs experience better academic skill development, reading readiness, fewer grade retentions and easier transitions to Grade 1. As well, parents face lower child-care costs while the system overall faces reduced future educational costs.

The paper, submitted in 2012, has yet to receive a response. Even today, the NDP maintains it's not a funding priority even after making it a key campaign plank in May 2015, promising to phase it in once elected.

"We have had to make some difficult choices given our current fiscal reality, but remain committed to further discussions with boards about the value of full-day kindergarten and targeted pilots where they will have the greatest impact on students," said Lindsay Harvey, press secretary for Education Minister David Eggen.

"Our focus to date has been on protecting existing classroom programs, and we have prioritized funding for enrolment growth and enhancing existing initiatives."

In spite of the province's hesitancy to provide full-day kindergarten funding, the Calgary Board of Education has chosen to find funding for 15 programs in at-risk communities across the city, including Penbrooke Meadows.

The Calgary Catholic School District does not offer full-day kindergarten, abandoning funding for up to 23 programs in 2013, because they could not receive support from the province.

Andrea Holowka, area superintendent, said the CCSD does offer preschool programs for English language learners, as well as provincial program unit funding to kids aged three to six who have specific learning disabilities or delays.

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Region: Alberta ^[3]

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