

Protecting full day KG is ON teachers priority ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As the battle over the future of public education in Ontario continues, some educators are expressing concern about full-day kindergarten (FDK).

Donna Weir, a kindergarten teacher with Mohawk Gardens Public School in Burlington, hit the picket line Thursday alongside colleague Alicia Lynds, a designated early childhood educator (DECE). Both told Global News FDK ensures young learners have a strong footing as they enter the public education system.

"It is essential that children have a good JK [junior kindergarten], SK [senior kindergarten] experience," Weir said.

"This is the beginning of their social and emotional development in particular. This is where they learn to play, this is where they learn to cooperate. It is where they learn how to negotiate problems, it's where they expand their thinking, their creativity, this is the beginning about learning about diversity, how to respect each other and respect our world."

Education Minister Stephen Lecce has said publicly he's committed to all-day kindergarten. In November, Lecce told reporters at Queen's Park, "I'm affirming that it is the aim of the government to strengthen all-day kindergarten and obviously to negotiate in good faith with the union. With that said, we believe that the model is working and there is no plan on my desk to change it."

But the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the union that represents elementary teachers, alleges that commitment has not been echoed by government negotiators.

"They have yet to make that commitment at the table. We simply don't understand why this minister is saying one thing publicly and doing another thing at the table," ETFO president Sam Hammond told Global News Thursday. "It's a world-class program," said Hammond. "Research and evidence suggest that it's vital to students and the future of this province. The minister and the government need to put a firm commitment in writing." Right now, Ontario has a model that consists of one teacher and one DECE per kindergarten classroom.

Weir says that two-educator team is critical. "You need both. You need the teacher and you need the early childhood educator. The early childhood educator brings forth the developmental knowledge in terms of social and emotional development. The teacher adds to that with the academic background that we have, particularly reading writing and math."

Lynds, who has been an educator for over 30 years, agrees. "One person would be almost impossible. With two of us in the room, there are

times even now where children that don't get our attention over a two week period," Lynds says. She says oftentimes teachers and DECE's are occupied helping students with special needs and behaviour issues "that we don't actually have time to sit down and work one-on-one with some of the children that are just floating along, they are just kind of in the background — they are doing OK, but they could go further if they had more access to help."

The women cite research that shows children who participate in full-day kindergarten excel in key areas like math, reading and writing as compared to those who attend half-day.

Lynds says parents who have children about to enter the system should be "very concerned." She's worried FDK is being used as a bargaining tool at the table and feels the government should invest more and focus on fixing current issues that exist.

"You have a child coming in who has needs or maybe they don't have needs, but they are going to be coming into a room where teachers are stretched very thin, there is a lack of supplies, resources, there is a lack of time for training, there's a lack of bodies in the classroom to manage an unsure number of kids — it could be 24 kids in your child's classroom, there could be 33."

ETFO and the government have not been at the bargaining table since December, with no future dates for negotiations set.

Minister Lecce was unavailable for an interview with Global News on Thursday.

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