

Schools bid conventional kindergarten classrooms goodbye, but at what cost? [CA-BC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Behind the door to UVic Child Care Centre 5, two dozen five-year-olds are scattered around various activity stations. In one corner, several are huddled together assembling a marble run. Two boys vie for dominance over another game that has no obvious rules. At one table, a girl has assembled a herd of plastic ponies and is methodically testing which ones have heads that can be pried off.

It might not look like school, but it is what early childhood educators call age-appropriate learning. What seems like anarchy is, to the experts, building the foundations of engineering, diplomacy and ... something else really important, possibly involving a future in medicine.

Last spring, the B.C. government floated the idea of launching full-time kindergarten for children as young as 3. The first phase, all-day classes for five-year-olds, could be available for the 35,000 children expected to arrive for their first day of school in the fall of 2009. Additional spaces for younger children would be phased in by 2012.

Jack Lalonde has reservations. He wonders whether the Ministry of Education, with its standard curriculums and obsession with achievement statistics, can figure out the needs of children just barely out of toddlerhood.

Mr. Lalonde is the head of the University of Victoria's Child Care Services, which offers the most sought-after child care in the city. He has spent four decades in the education field, trying to figure out what makes preschoolers tick.

The youngsters in Centre 5 have effectively won the lottery. Parents have been known to fax off their applications to the UVic child-care facility on the day their child is born - and that still won't guarantee them a place.

Next door, in Child Care Centre 4, three- and four-year-olds play at their own pace. Some of them will never touch a paint pot but can spend hours constructing block towers.

"They are not built to have structured time - they are just exploring their world," Mr. Lalonde explained as a trio of pint-sized superheroes dash past, zapping us with their fingers. "You can't force them to sit down and learn the alphabet."

Education Minister Shirley Bond said the idea solves two problems: Parents want more child-care choices, while her government wants to meet its "great goal" of becoming the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent.

The details have yet to be worked out - the ministry has extended its consultation process to later this month. The working plan would place extended kindergarten classes in existing schools. It would be play-based rather than a rigid curriculum. "I think people visualize little ones in desks - definitely not," Ms. Bond said.

More important, however, is who is going to be minding the kids. In a perfect world, this would be the domain of trained early-childhood educators, but daycares in B.C. are already struggling to find qualified staff. For working parents, it would also mean a single, all-day program, not a patchwork of after-school care for three-year-olds.

B.C. Teacher's Federation president Irene Lanzinger ought to be jumping at the chance to build her union's membership. Indeed, she supports all-day classes for five-year-olds. But she cautions that teachers are not trained to handle younger children.

"If we instituted a universally accessible, high-quality daycare program with well-paid daycare workers - that would be a better option than expanding our school-based academic system for children who are 3 and 4," Ms. Lanzinger concluded.

Prof. Margie Mayfield, of UVic's faculty of education, treats these ages as fragile, prone to crushing failure.

...

When she looks at the B.C. school system, she sees a one-size-fits-all approach that doesn't have the flexibility to adapt to the needs of young ones. "You have children come to school who are reading, and some who can't hold a pencil," she said.

Then there is the infrastructure. B.C. schools might have to accommodate tens of thousands of additional children in the next five years, after a period of rapid downsizing. Since 2001, 171 B.C. schools have been closed, while just 26 new schools have been built. Ms. Bond's ministry recently instructed school districts to stop selling off their properties in case they are needed, but it may have moved too late.

Ms. Bond doesn't want to venture how much all this might cost - she doesn't want to prejudge the public consultation - but it will be "a significant financial commitment by government."

The decision is wrapped in a tight time frame. Ms. Bond's consultation process is not expected to produce recommendations until the end of the year. School boards will start budget planning next February for a fiscal year that starts July 1. So if B.C. moves ahead, it leaves little time to reconfigure schools to accommodate the extra teachers, paint pots and cubbyholes they'll require in the fall.

Revamping kindergarten

The Early Childhood Learning Agency was established last February to examine the feasibility and cost of a full-school-day kindergarten program for five-year-olds, and optional programs for children as young as 3.

The motive, from the agency's consultation paper: "Brain research has shown that during the early years children's brains have the most plasticity. This evidence suggests that, during this time, there are windows of opportunity when children are especially receptive to experiences that can shape their whole lives. ...

"The economic benefits of quality programming in the early years have also been studied, showing significant savings in social programs when children participate in them."

The status quo in B.C.

Part-time kindergarten is available, and optional, for children who turn 5 before Jan. 1 of a school year. Full-day kindergarten is already offered to: English-as-a-second-language pupils, aboriginals and some children with special needs.

Elsewhere in Canada:

New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Quebec offer full-day kindergarten for five-year-olds;

Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Quebec offer some programs for four-year-olds;

Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador offer part-time kindergarten for five-year-olds;

Ontario provides part-day kindergarten for four-year-olds and is moving toward full-day for four- and five-year-olds.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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