

Victoria mulls all-day kindergarten [CA-BC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

B.C. parents could soon be sending their toddlers off to school as the provincial government considers pre-kindergarten classes for three- and four-year-olds and full-day kindergarten for five-year-olds.

The controversial proposal, up for public debate until July 18, is under review by the Ministry of Education after the government committed to a feasibility study in February's throne speech.

"One of the things we've been hearing more frequently is that parents want to have increased choices . . . for early learning," said Education Minister Shirley Bond yesterday.

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The proposal comes as wait times for daycare facilities grow longer, and studies show that one-quarter of B.C. kids who arrive at kindergarten are not developmentally ready.

The new classes could also provide a solution to the problem of declining enrolment that has seen numerous B.C. schools closed in recent years.

Bond said that while the cost and format of the possible program are still being researched, the throne speech stipulated full-day kindergarten would be considered for 2009, with optional pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds by 2010 and three-year-olds by 2012. Half-day kindergarten is currently optional in B.C.

Education expert Gary Rupert said studies show early childhood education programs can stimulate development if they're done properly.

"It's better to have licensed and trained teachers educating our children than the TV," the University of B.C. education professor said, adding that in today's society both parents often work, leaving kids in the hands of daycare providers who may not have the proper training.

"I don't believe the goal of the program is just to have kids do better in math and reading," he said. "It's about trying to create a better learning and growing situation where we would have fewer children at risk."

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Child-care advocate and Vancouver school trustee Sharon Gregson agreed but said the program should not separate "early learning from child care" for young children.

"We need to make sure the services are seamless," she said.

West Vancouver superintendent Geoff Jopson said his district has had full-time kindergarten since 2000, with parents paying extra to have their children stay for the afternoon.

"It has had a lot of support from parents," he said.

But others reacted differently to a Province story posted online yesterday.

"This is ridiculous. School for three- and four-year-olds is basically disguised free daycare for parents. Please don't put the taxpayers on the hook for this one," wrote J.M.

"Kids should be allowed to be kids," wrote Deborah. "For heaven's sake, they're just barely out of diapers. What's wrong with our society?"

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- reprinted from The Province

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