

Changes are coming to Ontario's kindergarten program – what parents and caregivers need to know ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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Excerpts

Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce recently announced Ontario's full-day kindergarten program is undergoing an "overhaul" which will help "to create more systemic approaches to reading instruction and the introduction, in a very basic way, of mathematical skills and numeracy skills."

What do these proposed changes mean for educators, parents and children?

The proposed revisions must be considered and understood in the context of 1) the current full-day play-based kindergarten curriculum, and 2) recommendations and research that emerged from Ontario's Right to Read report, released in February 2022, stemming from an inquiry of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC).

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While the province says kindergarten updates will be combined with "hands-on and play-based learning" there are concerns that play-based aspects of the curriculum – also grounded in evidence-based approaches to child development – could be impacted by curricular revisions.

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Ontario's full-day play-based kindergarten

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Essential to the revised kindergarten program was the play-based structure of the full-day program. So was the delivery of the model by a teaching team of an Ontario certified teacher and a registered early childhood educator.

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It is important to note that misconceptions exist about play-based learning, including the belief that play-based learning means letting children do whatever they want. Evidence-based play-based learning "...involves educators being deliberate and purposeful in creating play-based learning environments."

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The OHRC Right to Read report

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The inquiry's report includes 157 recommendations directly tied to addressing systemic issues affecting children's right to read. These involve changes to curriculum, instruction and interventions and screening and assessments related to reading. The recommendations for curriculum and instruction focus on the need for evidence-based direct and explicit instruction.

These recommendations were made based on the most up-to-date research on reading, lived experiences of students, families and educators and informed by expertise in the area of human rights.

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Not an either/or conversation

As revisions to Ontario's kindergarten curriculum unfold, stakeholders need to ensure the best scientific research in both play-based learning and early reading are leveraged to ensure the success of all young children.

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There are many educators in Ontario who already offer meaningful play-based learning opportunities and direct and systematic instruction in their classrooms.

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My current research in kindergarten classrooms, to be published later this year, examines how educators use a range of approaches (including teacher-directed play) to support children's literacy and self-regulation outcomes. This research has, to date, also documented kindergarten educators using systematic instruction in combination with play-based learning.

Educators need development, resources

What's needed is to ensure kindergarten educators are being provided with training and professional development to effectively lead classrooms utilizing both play-based learning and systematic instruction in reading, writing and math. This task is anything from basic – but is 100 per cent possible and necessary.

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Instead, we need to consider what these changes mean and how we can best support educators in successfully supporting children's learning – through both play-based learning and direct instruction.

Related link: Kindergarten program, 2006 ^[3]

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