

Provinces like Manitoba 'behind the times' on providing full-day kindergarten, expert says ^[1]

Longer day at school can benefit kids, parents — and the economy

Author: Gowriluk, Caitlyn

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Excerpts

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While some schools in Manitoba have full-day kindergarten, it's among the few Canadian provinces that doesn't offer it across the board.

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The discussion was sparked again last week, after Winnipeg's Louis Riel School Division announced it's considering raising education property taxes by an extra one per cent to expand full-day kindergarten to all 30 of its elementary schools.

That came just a few years after the Winnipeg School Division, the city's largest, axed its own full-day kindergarten pilot project, saying it didn't deliver the expected benefits on student learning and academic performance.

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Manitoba has a patchwork of approaches to kindergarten, though most schools offer it for a half day, five days a week. The Franco-Manitoban School Division is an outlier, having offered full-day kindergarten for years — including to Michalik's own now-adult children, who he said benefited greatly from it.

Those benefits extend beyond just academic outcomes, said McCuaig.

Research suggests the full-day approach improves soft skills, like learning to share and to show empathy. It also suggests attendance improves when kindergarten is full-day, because it reduces the stress of parents having to figure out child care for just a few hours.

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With their kids in school for a full day instead of just a few hours, parents of kindergarteners also have more choice in whether or how often they're able to work, "by virtue of the fact that you ... don't need to leave in the middle of the afternoon, or even early afternoon, to pick up kids," said Jonathan Jenner, an assistant professor of economics at the University of Manitoba.

That effect is especially significant for women, who generally speaking are responsible for more child care work than men, Jenner said.

Freeing up people to spend more time in the workforce — or potentially join it — could also help tackle Canada's ongoing labour shortage.

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Pedro Antunes, chief economist at the Conference Board of Canada, said research also suggests there are a number of social benefits from parents having better access to early childhood education and child care, including reducing income inequality and improving outcomes for kids — like decreasing incarceration rates — as they get older.

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But education experts Du and McCuaig both said while a full-day kindergarten program can be beneficial, it has to be done right — with an appropriate curriculum, teachers trained in early childhood education and enough staff.

"If one kindergarten teacher is going to be supporting or in charge of 30 children in a classroom setting, the quality of the program needs to be considered," Du said.

"Having teachers, training teachers, providing those experiences and quality programs — that takes money and that takes time."

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Region: Manitoba ^[3]

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