

B.C. floats idea of all-day kindergarten for three-year-olds [CA-BC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The B.C. government is floating the possibility of all-day kindergarten for children as young as three by 2012.

In a throne speech that called education "the key to our future," government promised Tuesday to set up an Early Childhood Learning Agency to study the cost of full-day kindergarten for three- to five-year-olds.

At present, B.C. public schools mostly offer half-day kindergarten to five-year-olds. The government does cover the cost of all-day kindergarten for aboriginal students, those who speak English as a second language, and some special-needs students.

In 2006, 5,600 of the 35,000 kindergarten students were registered for a full-day program, the education ministry said yesterday.

The new agency will look at the cost of expanding that to all five-year-olds, while giving parents the choice of day-long kindergarten for four-year-olds by 2010, and for three-year-olds by 2012.

But Education Minister Shirley Bond cautioned yesterday that government is merely exploring the idea.

"I think it's really appropriate for us to ask the questions: 'Is it feasible? Is it the right thing to do? Is it what parents would choose to do for their children?'"

The agency is expected to report within a year.

"This is not going to be a royal commission kind of thing," Bond said. "Let's ask some questions, gather some information. It really is building a case for whether or not this is the right thing to do."

The B.C. Teachers Federation has been advocating all-day kindergarten for five-year-olds since 1990.

"I think it's important that the students are at school all day, and we can assess their needs and better give them the services that they need," Jim Iker, the union's second vice-president, said yesterday.

But he said the province should simply move ahead with the program, rather than wasting money on a new agency and another study. The money would be better spent investing in existing programs that received little attention in yesterday's throne speech, he said.

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The speech did reveal that B.C. will add another 316 Strong Start B.C. centres over the next two years to help preschoolers and their parents get ready for kindergarten. B.C. will have 400 such centres by 2010, the speech said.

In addition, the province plans to set up a Centre for Autism Education and Research to provide a research hub and a "residential environment" for autistic children.

The government also plans to introduce legislation that will give the B.C. College of Teachers new powers to lift the teaching certificate of any teacher who is found to be incompetent.

Premier Gordon Campbell said the college will have the authority to define what constitutes incompetence.

"It's something that they [the college] have said that they think is important to have," he said. "I don't think any teacher wants to have incompetent teachers in the classroom. It is something that I think is important to improve the quality of education for people."

Bond declined to provide further details yesterday, saying government will be introducing legislation this session.

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