

Full-day kindergarten offers head start [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Last month Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty launched one of the most significant improvements in education in decades. Publicly-funded, full-day kindergarten for all will equalize opportunities for Ontario parents and their children by fostering a love of learning that will allow children to thrive in school, and beyond.

There has been some debate since Mr. McGuinty's announcement about the benefits of full-day kindergarten. But as a scientist with decades of research experience into early childhood learning challenges, let me be clear: There is no debate over the benefits of quality early learning and care programs. Extensive research has consistently shown that quality preschool, taught by teachers trained in early childhood development, improves not only school readiness, but also the social and emotional skills that help children for a lifetime.

Growing the public education system down to welcome younger children does not mean subjecting those not yet ready for the rigours of a classroom environment. The government's goal is not to mirror the sort of teacher-directed program that becomes so critical in grade school; it is to create an environment of child-directed activity that mobilizes the child's interest and imagination and is tailored to each child's highly individual style of learning.

We are only just beginning to understand the many reasons why preschool not only greatly facilitates the transition into school, but helps lay the foundation for the social, emotional, cognitive, communicative, and even physical capacities that underpin healthy mental functioning.

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A recently published report in *The Heinz School Review* (March 2007) described how vocabulary scores in children who attended public kindergarten were 31 per cent higher than children without the program; math skills improved by 44 per cent; and print awareness by 85 per cent. The study also found that, in order to obtain these favourable results, the child has to spend a minimum of three hours in the preschool, five days a week. Children who attended for three years did better than those who attended two years, and the two-year cohort had higher scores than those who attended one year.

Of course, the deciding factor here is the quality of the staffing. The best teachers are nurturers who make intentional use of play and experience-based learning by using a combination of child-initiated and teacher-selected activities.

That's no simple feat, which is exactly why teachers must have a sound understanding of the stages of a child's development and be able to detect potential challenges.

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Fortunately the tools for an excellent full-day early learning program are already in place in Ontario. During the government's last term, appointed panels of kindergarten and early childhood education specialists developed *Early Learning for Every Child Today*, a curriculum framework that promotes play-based learning and helps identify and plan for the social-emotional and cognitive learning that happens in quality environments. They also made practical recommendations to enhance the training of professionals working with young children.

Universal full-day preschool, embedded in an established public education system, linked to community partners and delivered by well-trained professionals working from a sound curriculum -- from this foundation Ontario can expect great things in its future.

- reprinted from Ottawa Citizen

Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: quality ^[3]

funding ^[4]

kindergarten ^[5]

staff ^[6]

outcomes ^[7]

full-day early learning ^[8]
curricula and pedagogy ^[9]

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[2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856>

[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality>

[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding>

[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/kindergarten>

[6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/staff>

[7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/outcomes>

[8] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8149>

[9] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/curricula-and-pedagogy>