

The new kindergarten - let's play math! [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It used to be dismissed as high-priced babysitting, a place where children learned fingerpainting and played with blocks.

But kindergarten teachers say the pendulum has swung the other way — and a new kindergarten curriculum being launched this fall in Ontario shows just how much the province expects of its youngest students.

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To the untrained eye, kindergarten classes this fall will have the same blocks, pots of paint and puppets. But what students and teachers are expected to do with those materials is specified in copious new detail in the curriculum document, only the second in Ontario's history.

More than ever, the kindergarten curriculum dovetails precisely with the rest of Ontario's crammed school program, outlining exactly which skills a child is expected to have by the time they get to Grade 1.

When they finish kindergarten, students have to be able to write a short piece of text such as a greeting card or grocery list — even if they haven't spelled the words correctly.

They have to be able to retell a story, with an accurate sequence of events. They must be able to estimate quantities, understand the concept of volume and decipher simple math problems using words instead of numerals.

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The new 74-page kindergarten guidelines — part of the government's ongoing review of the entire public school curriculum — updates the 23-page, 1998 version.

It includes an added learning unit on health and physical activity, in addition to rigorous expectations on the five key learning areas of language — math, science and technology, the arts, and personal and social development.

That means by the time they're finished kindergarten, in addition to everything else, students have to demonstrate a basic grasp of nutrition, safety, their emotional well-being and hygiene — such as being able to tell the teacher what they would do if they encountered broken glass on the playground, or explain they are thirsty after running around at recess.

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Increasingly, teachers are facing pressure from parents, boards and principals to make their programs less about play and more about academics.

[Joan] Littleford [of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario] is hoping the new curriculum document, with its specific examples of how a young child demonstrates knowledge — such as lining up teddy bears in order of size, or painting a balloon to show the letter "b" — is the ammunition teachers need to persuade others that a child's work really is play.

It also shows the value of traditional kindergarten teaching tools such as water and sand tables — unpopular with other school staff because they make a mess but invaluable in teaching a child about volume or recreating the setting of a story.

In sessions ranging from the value of playdough to the best classroom activity centres, kindergarten teachers this summer are learning how to connect the latest research on child brain development and their school programs.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Related link: Full document: Kindergarten program, 2006^[2]

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