

# Preschooler program first phase of grand plan [CA-ON] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Ontario's plunge into full-day kindergarten and child care for all preschoolers is the first phase of a grander plan to fund early education and care for children from cradle to classroom.

Ontario Children's Services Minister Marie Bountrogianni will unveil plans today for a Quebec-style government-funded kindergarten and child-care program for four- and five-year-olds that her government intends -- voters willing -- to unroll over the next decade to include all children of preschool age.

Sources said Ontario is starting with four- and five-year-olds, to win over parents and build the political momentum to expand to include free half-day preschool for children 2½ to almost 4.

Andrew Weir, a spokesman for Dr. Bountrogianni, warned that the program's future depends on federal funding promised to underwrite a national early-childhood-education system, and it will take years before all of the more than 250,000 four- and five-year-olds will be enrolled in the full-day mix of kindergarten and child care, never mind providing preschool.

Ontario expects to collect about \$400-million from Ottawa over the next few months -- the first instalment of the \$5-billion over five years that Ottawa has promised to create a national system of early learning and care. A month ago, social service ministers from the provinces agreed to a national program that would be guided by the principles of quality, universality, accessibility and development.

Dr. Bountrogianni's announcement is a first glimpse at the province's long-awaited Best Start plan, and makes good on an election promise to provide full-day junior and senior kindergarten to the province's children.

Under the government's plan, children would continue to attend kindergarten for half the day as they currently do. But rather than be picked up by parents or bused to child-care centres blocks away, they would walk to a child-care centre within or close to their school, with less disruption and closer ties between kindergarten teachers and early-childhood educators.

The government plans to draft a curriculum for the combined kindergarten and child-care program, and fancies the one adopted by Quebec child-care centres called Jouer, c'est magique, which stresses learning through play rather than forcing children to sit at tables with pencils and paper to learn reading and writing.

As an olive branch to the municipalities, which normally cover 20 per cent of the cost of child-care subsidies, the province plans to pay the entire cost of the full-day kindergarten and child-care program for the first year.

But the government's Best Start plan includes more than full-day kindergarten, and Dr. Bountrogianni will announce an expansion of services for young children, including more preschool speech and language assessment, more home visits to families at risk and universal screening for 18-month-olds.

With a shortage of details, academics and child-care advocates remain guarded.

"I'm more optimistic than I've been in a long time," said Jane Bertrand, executive director with the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

Quebec <sup>[3]</sup>

Ontario <sup>[4]</sup>

**Tags:** subsidy <sup>[5]</sup>

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