

# Will all-day school be ready for 2010? <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Monsebraaten, Laurie

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EXCERPTS

Six-year-old Ethan Podolsky can't wait to start Grade 1 next week and go to school all day for the first time.

And his mother, Elissa, hopes her 3-year-old daughter, Lauren, will also get to spend all day at school when she starts junior kindergarten next year.

"I'm a big proponent of all-day kindergarten and I know my daughter will be ready," Podolsky says of the province's promise to introduce full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-olds next fall.

But will Ontario schools and daycares be ready?

And will Queen's Park also provide the so-called seamless day - that integrates child care with learning from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. - as early learning adviser Charles Pascal recommended in June?

With Ontario's economy in the dumps and elementary teachers quibbling over who should work in the classroom, supporters of Pascal's plan to transform local schools into community hubs for kids from birth to age 12 are nervous.

"The province has been very quiet. And frankly, that's been a worry," said parent advocate Annie Kidder of People for Education. "We need to see a commitment to the full vision that Charles has laid out that sees the whole child and the whole family in an integrated way. And we need to see how (the province) plans to proceed.

"If we just take a piece of this, it isn't going to cause the change that's needed," she said.

Peel District School Board Director Jim Grieve is also keen to start the early learning revolution.

"We've had two meetings in Peel already with our (municipal and child-care) partners just to say we're going to be in this together and we're going to work on this together," he said.

"I think whatever we do first has to be terrific. It can't be slipshod."

Pascal, who describes his plan as an "enemy of the status quo," calls for teachers to continue to provide a half-day of instruction, with child-care workers covering the remainder of the school day and any before- and after-school care parents may need. The school-day portion would be publicly funded while parents would pay a modest fee for the rest, he suggests.

For students from grades 1 to 6, schools would oversee after-school child care and recreation when at least 15 families request it. Municipalities would oversee new parenting and child-care centres in schools for families with kids under age 3.

Pascal estimates the cost at \$1 billion annually, including \$500 million to expand or renovate schools.

Premier Dalton McGuinty trumpeted the release of Pascal's report in June and reaffirmed the Liberals' 2007 election vow to spend \$200 million next year and \$300 million in 2011 on all-day learning.

So far, McGuinty has refused to commit to anything beyond the official school day. Instead, he said the government would take the summer to review the plan.

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Another wrinkle on the horizon is teachers, who earlier this month voted to fight any move that allows child-care workers in the classroom during the school day without them present. Catholic elementary teachers have similar concerns.

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"The province can't implement full-day kindergarten in isolation of the rest of the system," said Petr Varmuza, children's services director in Toronto.

"Until we know what the provincial intention is, we can't really prepare as well as we would like to. It's going to be exciting if integrated full-day learning (from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.) is happening.

"If it's not happening and they just expect someone to provide extra hours of child care around the program, then that will be a complete disaster."

Pascal says his report is a package and the province can't cherry-pick.

The program only works from a quality and cost perspective if schools integrate before- and after-school programming for kids from age 4 to 12, he said.

That way, school boards can employ full-time, full-year early childhood educators to keep younger kids engaged and learning after school hours and in the summer months.

Without Pascal's broader vision, McGuinty's full-day learning initiative is nothing more than a few extra hours of school that Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick already provide, said Canadian child-care expert Martha Friendly.

"A full school day program by itself overlooks what happens to children after the school bell rings," she said.

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"It's a constant juggle when you have child care in one place and school somewhere else," she said. "Parents in my community find a way to manage. But what a difference this would make in disadvantaged communities."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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

**Tags:** kindergarten <sup>[3]</sup>

full-day early learning <sup>[4]</sup>

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