

B.C. government won't divulge details of preschool plan ^[1]

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It's been more than two years since the B.C. government first mentioned a plan to offer preschool for three- and four-year-olds as part of its drive to improve literacy provincewide, but parents still know little about what's in store.

While the Liberals insist they're committed to offering the service, they've refused to divulge details, except to say they want to work with the private sector to open neighbourhood preschools in the next five years. An Education Ministry spokesman said plans will likely be unveiled later this year.

For now, the ministry's focus is on its rollout of full-day kindergarten, beginning this fall when spaces will be available in public schools for half the province's five-year-olds. By September 2011, full-day kindergarten is expected to be an optional program in every school, replacing the half-day program.

The government's silence, meanwhile, about its vision for preschool is feeding worries among those who don't want to see three- and four-year-olds in school. Some insist that public money should be spent instead on high-quality child care, which is in short supply.

"We agree with all-day kindergarten [for five-year-olds], but we have to work really hard to keep it play-based and child-centred," Irene Lanzinger, president of the B.C. Teachers' Federation, said in an interview. "Before [age] five, we should have high-quality, accessible child care. That should be the priority."

Sharon Gregson, a child care advocate and Vancouver school trustee, agrees. She said the term "preschool" generally refers to programs that are offered a few times a week for a couple of hours a day, and Vancouver already has an abundance of such services. What's desperately needed is full-day, quality child care, she said, noting that those facilities have massive wait-lists. "Working parents don't need part-time, part-day service," she added.

While congratulating the government for acknowledging the importance of early learning, Gregson said it's well past time the Liberals explained where they're heading rather than simply dropping vague comments about early learning in two throne speeches and a budget and leaving the public in the dark. "It's so difficult to know what the heck they're talking about," she said.

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The key ingredients of any preschool program, according to the early-learning agency, are choice, quality and staged implementation that will allow proper preparations. The benefits for children include

improvements in reading, writing, math, social development, work habits, motor skills and performance on standardized tests, its report says.

The agency suggested that new preschools could involve existing preschool and child care providers and said parents should be offered early learning with wraparound child care

Region: British Columbia ^[2]

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full-day early learning ^[4]

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