

Full-day learning draws last-minute fears ^[1]

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A provincial committee is finalizing legislation this week that will launch full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-olds in Ontario, beginning this fall with a first rollout for 35,000 students across 600 schools, with all children to have the program within six years.

But a number of school trustees have complained the province is not providing enough money, and some want to be able to use outside agencies to run the programs before and after school.

"With an issue this complex, with all the nuances of the relationship between day cares and schools, it's not humanly possible to get it right on the first cut, so we hope the legislation will be flexible," said Toronto Trustee Howard Goodman, vice-president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association. He urged the province to put the nitty-gritty details of implementation into regulations that can be tweaked on short notice if needed.

"Everyone agrees with the principle of full-day learning, but if the government is too speedy and screws it up, it could cost them the election (next year)," said Goodman.

In contrast, parent advocacy group People For Education criticized the province for being slow to implement the broader recommendations of before- and after-school programs for children aged 0 to age 12, all year-round, as proposed by McGuinty advisor Charles Pascal in his sweeping blueprint for early learning.

"It can't be a mish-mash; Charles Pascal said you can't cherry-pick parts of the vision - it's like an eco-system; you need child and family centres for kids 0 to 4, and all-day programs for 4- and 5-year-olds and you need funding to pay early childhood educators," said spokesperson Annie Kidder.

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"They're introducing it in 15 per cent of schools the first year, and adding 5 per cent more schools the next year - how much more slowly can you go?"

Education ministry spokesperson Michelle Despault said the legislation likely will let school boards use outside agencies to provide after-school care during a transitional period.

"Our vision is for a program delivered by the school board that is seamless and integrated, however we have heard the concerns of stakeholders in the child-care sectors (YMCA, Boys and Girls Club etc)

as well as school boards on the provision of services by third-party providers," noted Despault.

"It is our intention, should the legislation pass, to develop a regulation in consultation with stakeholders that will speak to those situations where we will recognize delivery of programs (for 4- and 5-year-olds during the school year) by third parties, within parameters, for a transitional period."

Too, she said the government has provided an amendment to make it clear that school boards can continue to use third-party partners to offer after-school programs for 6- to 12-year-olds and extended-year programs for 4- to 12-year-olds.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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