

Big bang for full-day learning buck^[1]

but only if government implements full vision

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EXCERPTS

Ontario is missing out on a significant economic payoff by offering a scaled-down version of full-day learning this fall, says a report being released Monday.

A new economic analysis of the initiative outlined by the premier's early learning adviser last spring shows an immediate return of \$2.02 for every dollar invested in operations and \$1.47 for every dollar spent on new classrooms, says the report, obtained by the Star.

Over the medium and long term, every dollar invested in the program generates \$2.42 for the province in reduced social costs and improved health outcomes, says the report by the Centre for Spatial Economics.

But the centre's analysis warns these benefits will be much lower if year-round and before- and after-school programs are not offered, as envisioned by early-learning adviser Charles Pascal.

The province has opted to fund the school-day portion of all-day kindergarten, but has left it up to school boards to plan extended-day programs that will be paid for by parents.

As a result, few schools in Ontario will be offering extended-day programs when the first phase of full-day kindergarten begins next month for 35,000 children in about 600 schools. There will be none in Toronto.

"If these elements are not fully in place, the benefits are reduced," says economist Robert Fairholm, who wrote the report for the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development in the wake of critics who say Ontario can't afford the ambitious program.

"If full-day learning becomes stuck at full-day kindergarten, and the transitions between school and ad hoc child care arrangements persist, many of the child development advantages will also be reduced, particularly for children with development risks," he writes.

Premier Dalton McGuinty has said he is committed to Pascal's full vision but is focusing on the school-day portion of the initiative first due to the province's faltering economy.

Pascal called for an integrated system of early learning for children from conception to age 12. He recommended spending up to \$1 billion annually to expand half-day kindergarten to a full day for the province's 250,000 4- and 5-year-olds and another \$1.7 billion to upgrade classrooms. School boards would offer optional extended-day and full-year programs at a modest fee to parents.

As school boards assume the cost of caring for children from age 4 to 12, savings to the child-care system would be plowed into new child and family centres to better serve younger children, Pascal said.

McGuinty has committed \$500 million over the next two years to get the ball rolling, with the expectation that all schools would offer full-day kindergarten by 2015.

But since the province has opted to have teachers in the classroom during the school day - and not less costly early childhood educators for part of the time - annual operating costs will rise to \$1.5 billion.

School boards say they aren't offering the before- and after-school option because fees of up to \$30 a day have made parents reluctant to sign up.

"The challenge is cost. Parents can't afford the fees," said Toronto Catholic board Trustee Catherine LeBlanc-Miller (Ward 9).

Catherine Fife, chair of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, said school boards "fully support" Pascal's vision but need more time to iron out the details.

"No one has officially called it a pilot year, but that's the thinking," she said in an interview. "We are monitoring the costs of the program and we are tracking the positive aspects and the challenges . . . in the hope of working in partnership with (the government) to strengthen it in year two."

For Pascal, who has not yet read the report, the extended-day, full-year aspect of the program is "absolutely the deal maker" when it comes to benefits to children, parents and society.

He blames the lack of time and information available to parents for low interest. But next year he predicts demand will "skyrocket."

"When teachers, principals and parents have good information about the quality aspects and the cost-effectiveness of the extended-day, full-year (program), it's going to be a no-brainer," he said.

Fairholm's analysis is based on numerous earlier studies of the impact of child care on parents' - mostly mothers' - ability to work and on the social, educational and health benefits for children in high quality programs.

The extended-day and full-year option provides the best opportunity for parents to enter or remain in the workforce, and are the two elements that deliver many of the plan's economic benefits, Fairholm said in an interview.

Hiring more teachers and early-childhood educators who will spend their wages in the local economy creates an immediate economic benefit, as does building new kindergarten classrooms, the study notes.

Over the longer term, children enrolled in high quality early-learning programs tend to do better in school, are more healthy and more likely to complete high school and go to college and university. Higher education leads to higher wages and more tax revenue, the report says, while lower health and social costs reduce government spending.

It is not clear if the lack of extended-day, full-year programs this year is just growing pains or a sign the McGuinty government has switched course in the face of tough economic times, the report says.

If the latter is true, then the government is turning its back on "probably one of the most effective economic stimulus programs it could implement," Fairholm said.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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