

Full-day kindergarten to ripple through B.C. education system ^[1]

New approach has supporters and detractors, but ready or not, the bells ring next Tuesday

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Thousands of B.C. schoolchildren begin their educational careers next week as full-day kindergartners, a big change in a province where a half-day kindergarten routine has been in place for decades.

Education Minister Margaret MacDiarmid said 544,000 students will open the 2010-11 academic year on Tuesday, with 21,000 of them heading to full-day kindergarten classes.

"We're really delighted that our program, full-day kindergarten, is going to start next week in schools around the province," MacDiarmid told a media conference. "A little bit more than half of the students of kindergarten age will be in the full-day program this year."

Full-day kindergarten will serve them well in the future, she said.

"We're excited because we know this is a great opportunity for these students, that the investment in early learning has been demonstrated very clearly in research around the world to improve the learning for the students."

They also stand a better chance of graduating from both Grade 12 and a post-secondary institution, MacDiarmid said.

The phased-in approach to full-day kindergarten will see it completely implemented next September, with an estimated 40,000 youngsters attending day-long classes in all B.C. elementary schools.

Provincial funding of \$280 million over three years is being provided, while \$144 million for related construction needs and provision of space was announced in June.

John Bird of the Victoria Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils said the move to full-day kindergarten has not generated recent discussion among members of his group, although concerns could come up once the school year gets underway.

"I'm not hearing anything yet. Nobody has reported any issue of any kind."

At Oaklands Elementary, kindergarten teacher Sandy Crisp will have three new colleagues to work with in the full-day program. About 80 kindergarten students will be arriving, up from 60 in 2009-10, at the Greater Victoria school district facility.

"Last year we had three half-time classes. This year we have four full-time classes," said Crisp, who was at the school yesterday making preparations to his classroom for the coming year.

Full-day kindergarten can have several benefits, he said.

"What we're hoping is to really go into more detail on our themes. We can probably get out on more field trips, and we can go out in the community more and explore."

The basic goals of kindergarten remain the same, Crisp said.

"The thing for kindergarten students is you want them to learn how to learn, and you want them to socialize."

All told, the Greater Victoria district (with about 20,000 students overall in 2009-10) had 825 full-day and 506 half-day kindergarten students registered at the start of the summer break.

In the Saanich district (which had about 7,600 students in 2009-10), there are 249 full-day and 139 half-day registrants. Sooke (with about 8,475 students in 2009-10) has 366 in full-day classes and about the same number in half-day classes, and the Gulf Islands district (about 1,500 students in 2009-10) has 40 attending full-day and 60 half-day.

As one of just seven B.C. school districts with a growing student population, Sooke has the most construction and physical preparation tied to full-day kindergarten in the capital region.

"This year, we had to add a portable at Lakewood school and at Happy Valley school. Then we're building four additions and adding a bunch

of modulars," said Ron Warder, Sooke's assistant superintendent, adding that the full-day option has proved to be popular.

"We soon ran out of full-day spaces and we probably had 50 requests that we weren't able to accommodate."

As in other districts, the added classroom time has meant more kindergarten teachers have been hired in Sooke.

"We added new staff to the tune of about 12 full-time equivalents," Warder said.

"Some teachers that were half time became full time."

Greater Victoria Teachers' Association president Tara Ehrcke cited concerns over the plan to have up to seven kindergarten/Grade 1 split classes in the Greater Victoria district.

"We think that the kids in those seven classes are at a disadvantage."

Administrators have countered that such measures as supporting teachers through consultation and offering workshops will effectively deal with split-class situations.

Ehrcke said inadequate funding has led to the split classes.

She added that B.C. could take a lesson from Ontario's concurrent move to full-day kindergarten, where there are no split classes and a better funding model is being provided.

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