

Full-day kindergarten in Ontario gets failing grade ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Full-day kindergarten comes to three provinces this week, but Ontario has already earned a failing grade. Just 40 per cent of schools offering the new full-day sessions for four- and five-year-olds will include the additional early-morning and after-school care called for by the province's ambitious early learning policy.

"It's not where I would have liked to have seen it," Premier Dalton McGuinty said in an interview, adding that the shortfall is most likely a result of poor communication. School boards and parents weren't well informed about the availability of additional care, which is offered only at schools where enough pupils signed up.

That extra time is viewed by some experts as essential because it ensures that children stay in one place through the day, lining up with research that suggests transitions can disrupt a child's learning.

Changing views of how younger children develop lie behind a national move toward full-time kindergarten. Ontario's new Early Learning Program starts in some schools Tuesday and is supposed to be operating in every school in five years. British Columbia is introducing full-days for five-year-olds this fall in half its kindergarten classrooms and will complete the roll-out next year. Prince Edward Island is launching full-day kindergarten for all four-year-olds in every classroom this fall.

Ontario's program is the most ambitious because it includes four-year-olds as well as five-year-olds, and aims to bring before- and after-school care as well as year-round child care to every school.

But it will be years before there's conclusive evidence as to whether the investment of billions of dollars by the Ontario Liberal government in full-day kindergarten is justified. The earliest hints will come from standardized test scores in 2014, when the math, reading and writing skills of the first cohort of full-day senior kindergarten students are assessed.

But educational success at this young age is gauged less by literacy and numeracy than through developmental, psychological and social measures that are more complicated. They are hard to measure, but early learning experts say qualities like self-confidence, co-operation with peers and ability to self-regulate are formed in these first school years, with lifelong effects.

"The problem with the half-day program was that once you got started, the time was over," said Cheryl Einhorn, a kindergarten teacher at Westminster Public School in Thornhill, Ont., where kindergarten classes will be full-day this fall. "And so we'd just get started and the kids would get really excited about something or passionate about something and then you had to stop because it was time to go home."

Ms. Einhorn is a proponent of play-based learning, the catch-phrase for many teachers this fall. It forms the basis of the full-day kindergarten curriculum and holds that children learn better through active experience, when they're allowed to ask questions and explore the answers on their own.

"I think that giving us more time during the day will allow for more time to explore and more time to go back and talk about [what we're learning]," Ms. Einhorn said. "I'm thrilled - it's a dream come true."

But not everyone is with the program.

Kate Tennier, a parent and former teacher, is part of grassroots movement called Kindergarten Credit, which supports the half-day model.

She believes that play-based learning can happen more easily at home than in the confines of a crowded classroom, and that the Early Learning Program is too focused on economics and bolstering the work force.

Much discussion of the program has been focused on the price tag - Mr. McGuinty has already promised \$200-million for this school year, \$300-million for the second year, and \$245-million toward renovations and school additions - and on projected economic returns, including the boon of child care for working families and the long-term economic benefits of decreased dropout rates among students.

Kevin Milligan, an economics professor at the University of British Columbia, believes the benefits of all-day kindergarten are likely being overestimated.

"There is really quite strong evidence that for families from very disadvantaged backgrounds there can be a benefit - in fact, some evidence is that it can be very big," he said.

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