

Sprints run high as 20,000 begin all-day kindergarten ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ciana Pellicia felt understandably on edge for her first day of kindergarten.

She and fellow students at Coquitlam's Walton Elementary were among the 20,000 kids who started B.C.'s much-touted full-day initiative Tuesday.

"I feel nervous," Ciana said shyly, on a break from playing on a wooden jungle gym.

Angela Pellicia said her daughter will become more independent with better social and language skills.

"Two-and-a-half hours isn't long enough for kids to be away from their parents," she said, adding that longer days will also ease childcare woes for working parents.

Education Minister Margaret Mac-Diarmid was in Coquitlam to help promote the program, which will cost \$280 million over three years, and another \$144.5 million to build extra classrooms.

Ontario kindergartners also embarked on their own all-day learning on Tuesday.

"The most important thing is to deepen and extend their understanding," said teacher Nicole Daneault.

Proponents say full-day learning allows for smoother transitions to Grade 1, higher graduation rates, and better numeracy and literacy.

Though Coquitlam school-board officials say the curriculum is based on an entire day, unsure parents can pick up their kids after a half-day.

B.C.'s first bilingual kindergarten/ Grade 1 program in English and Mandarin also launched Tuesday for 90 Walton students.

Simone Simpson-Ferguson and her eldest son speak some Mandarin at home, and so she enrolled her five-year-old, Kean, in Walton's program.

"I'm only putting them ahead of the game," she said.

Outside the classrooms, MacDiarmid acknowledged recent criticism by NDP Leader Carole James about the overcrowding in Surrey classrooms, which are also taking on full-day kindergarten.

"We've got some areas that are growing so fast that a new school was full on day one," she told reporters, but said the number of portables is dropping.

Surrey had 370 portables in the late 1990s, she said. It had 230 last year, and will have even fewer in 2011.

"There's a light at the end of the tunnel," she said, though added that "education can happen very well in a portable classroom."

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