

Full-day K: Are we ready? ^[1]

New kindergarten programs lauded, but child care workers' wonder what's on the horizon

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This week marks a pivotal moment for both parents and the provincial government, as the first batch of full-day kindergarten students started school.

Groups of five-year-olds parted from their parents Tuesday morning to join the inaugural full-day program, which is fully funded by the Ministry of Education as part of a new province-wide initiative.

The full-day trend is proving popular with many working families, but it's not all fun and games for everyone involved. As young students fill seats in local classrooms, other spots are left vacant at daycares and childcare centres. Struggling to cope with the change, some childcare providers warn that vital before- and after-school programs could be at risk.

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"I think it's a wonderful program," she said as Nada examined shells and pinecones through a magnifying glass.

Other parents agreed, including Glenda Gimenez, whose son Joshua also started full-day kindergarten at Walton Elementary.

"I think it's great. They can get more experience. I have a daughter going into Grade 1 today too. She did the regular half-day kindergarten last year, but two hours a day wasn't enough," Gimenez said.

"I'm going back to school at Douglas College, so that gives me more time for it. I'm excited."

Half of all kindergarten students across B.C. will study in full-day classes this year, with the other half starting next September. Throughout the province, about 20,000 kindergartners will take part in the initial full-day program in 2010-2011. This total includes 887 five-year-olds in School District 43, who will learn in 60 classrooms at 23 schools.

The provincial government is investing \$280 million over the next three years to fund the program's operating expenses, plus another \$144 million for capital costs.

Education Minister Margaret MacDiarmid lauded the benefits of full-day kindergarten as she officially launched the initiative Tuesday morning at Walton Elementary.

"These are programs that will allow our children to really thrive and succeed in school - higher graduation rates, smoother transition to Grade 1, more likely to attend and complete post-secondary school. So it's a great investment, and you can see from this classroom, non-stop fun," MacDiarmid said.

"Other jurisdictions are quite far ahead of us, including some of the other provinces like Ontario and, to some extent, Alberta. This is an investment that will pay off enormously - monetarily, economically, but also just for the quality of life for these students."

District 43 assistant superintendent Maureen Dockendorf said the response to full-day kindergarten has been overwhelmingly positive so far, although some parents are concerned that the six-hour day might be too long for their child.

To accommodate these concerns, Dockendorf said parents are welcome to speak with teachers and principals to arrange alternatives. They can request that their child begin with half-day classes and then gradually move into a full-day format.

"There's huge flexibilities, and parents will make those decisions," Dockendorf said. "They know their children the best."

Families can also opt to skip out on kindergarten entirely, since kids aren't mandated to be in school until Grade 1, she added.

This week, kindergarten teachers will meet with each family individually to determine the best way to support children in a full-day setting.

"We have to pay attention to the needs of the child," said Dockendorf, who worked as a kindergarten teacher for eight years.

"If that child needs longer before they spend the full day at school, it is our responsibility to tailor the program, to personalize the learning of every child. That's our goal."

The kindergarten curriculum will continue to focus on literacy and numeracy through play-based activities. In addition, Dockendorf said students will learn "21st century skills" like creativity, curiosity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication through technology.

"I actually believe that this is a wonderful opportunity to extend and deepen their learning," Dockendorf said.

Not everyone, however, is enthusiastic about the onset of full-day kindergarten.

For many childcare providers, the switch to longer school hours creates concerns about staff retention, revenue loss and program structure.

Lynne Murray, owner of Panda Bear Children's Place, said she feels fortunate that the schools near her two Coquitlam locations are still offering half-day kindergarten. She's already worried about how she'll recruit staff next year when most shifts will be split between before- and after-school care. If she can't keep her staff, she'll need to reduce the number of childcare spaces available.

"We're losing government support at the level of kindergarten because they do support childcare programs that are licensed and meet the requirements," Murray said.

"We're also losing parent fees. And we're going to have to be paying our staff more to entice them into working split shifts."

The end result could mean less childcare availability overall, she said.

"We are working very hard to survive and to work in partnership," she said. "We've been in this long enough and we do understand that the point is to make this work for families and to make things better for children."

MacDiarmid, however, noted that provincial investment may expand to include younger children in the future. "We know students who do better in school are much more likely to thrive in the adult world. They're much more likely to be employed. They'll have a better quality of life. They're less likely to require health services. So there's a myriad of reasons to invest here."

But for Barb Badiani, administrator of Bramblewood Montessori Preschool and Daycare, communication has been lacking.

"We're really impacted by this. We've not even been approached or asked to see what roles do we play," Badiani said.

"Right now, we're trying to figure out how we're going to maintain our centre next year. If we're to maintain it, we definitely have to change our programs because we won't be able to sustain enrolment."

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-reprinted from Coquitlam Now

Region: British Columbia ^[2]

Tags: public opinion ^[3]

kindergarten ^[4]

staff ^[5]

full-day early learning ^[6]

curricula and pedagogy ^[7]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/10/09/full-day-k-are-we-ready> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7860> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/public-opinion> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/childcare> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/staff> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8149> [7]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/curricula-and-pedagogy>