

All-day kindergarten a 'no brainer' to put kids on the path to success^[1]

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Canada's provinces are moving in the right direction by sending their youngest students to class all day and embracing what much of the world already knows: that learning needs to start earlier in life, experts say.

Ontario, British Columbia and Prince Edward Island are moving ahead with full-day kindergarten this week, a program that's quickly catching the eye of governments in countries like Australia, said Dr. Charles Pascal, Ontario's early-learning adviser.

"In economic and social terms, this investment is a no-brainer," he said.

"Frankly, we're going to look back on this 20 years from now and wonder about the Dark Ages before we provided this kind of support for kids and their families."

About a quarter of Canadian children show up in Grade 1 "seriously behind" their peers, which is reason enough to extend school hours for younger children, Pascal argues. But there are other benefits that far outweigh the costs of investing in early learning, from alleviating poverty to reducing crime.

Research shows that brain development in the early years affects everything from behaviour to mental and physical health, experts say.

"The impact of early childhood development and learning extends way beyond the school years," said Dr. Paul Cappon, president and CEO of the Canadian Council on Learning.

"It impacts the socialization of the child, it impacts the health of the child and the learning capacity - including the love of learning of the child - and those kinds of effects are lifelong. Those societies which do that well will do better in the long run than those that don't."

Full-day kindergarten isn't necessarily a must, he added. Some European countries have sophisticated daycare systems that put kids on the right path before they ever set foot in a classroom.

For countries like Canada which spends very little on early childhood development compared to other industrialized countries - about 0.25 per cent of its GDP compared to one to two per cent in Scandinavia - early access to formal schooling becomes more important, particularly for kids who live in poverty or have learning difficulties, he said.

With no coherent national plan for early years learning, the provinces had to strike out on their own, creating a patchwork of services and programs, Cappon added.

Full-day kindergarten is a step in the right direction, but intervention to improve a child's development should start even earlier, said Dr. Fraser Mustard, a Canadian pioneer in early development research.

In countries like Cuba, it begins with good nutrition for pregnant mothers, he said.

"We are still a long way from that in our country, but this is a step in the right direction because you're bringing the interactions which affect the development of the brain in at an earlier age," Mustard said.

"That's all education is. It's just getting the architecture and function of the brain set."

New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Quebec already offer all-day kindergarten for five-year-olds. Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Quebec offer some programs for four-year-olds.

Ontario, which already offers half-day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds, started full-day programming for both age groups at about 600 schools on Tuesday. Premier Dalton McGuinty has promised to expand the optional program to all schools by 2015, at an estimated cost of \$1.5 billion a year.

Prince Edward Island is offering full-day kindergarten starting Thursday, for an estimated 1,400 kids.

B.C., which delayed the program for a year, estimates it has 21,000 children enrolled in full-day kindergarten and plans to roll it out across the province by next fall.

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