

Kindergarten expansion drawing raves ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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The young Ms. Foster is part of the cohort of Central Okanagan students going to full-day kindergarten for the first time.

She may not know the difference between half-day or full-day kindergarten, but it became an item of some apprehension for parents and teachers when the provincial government officially announced that all elementary schools in B.C. would extend those half days of kindergarten to full days by 2011.

The first line-up of schools started this fall and, by next year, all schools will include full-day kindergarten.

The main concerns were that the students were too young for a full day. They'd be tired and not able to focus.

As well, many wondered about the work load. Would students be doing twice as much work? Would they be bored?

And, what about the little kids in with the bigger ones? Would there be trouble?

Most of the fears seem to have worked themselves out as the students, staff and parents get used to the format. In fact, the response has been positive.

"I haven't had a single complaint," says Central Okanagan School District superintendent Hugh Gloster.

"It's been well received."

In fact, the only aspect left that needs attention is where to house the next wave of kindergarten students next year in schools that are already full.

For parents, however, the big anxieties seem to have subsided as the new students adjust to their schedules.

Jaelyn's mom, Sherry Foster, said since Jaelyn is her only child and the whole concept of kindergarten is new, trying to figure out what her daughter was in for with the new program was baffling at first without an example to go by.

"It's hard to pull information out of a five-year-old to find out what their day is like," she says.

"I'd get, 'I played. I talked to two girls and a boy.'"

Then, when her teacher at Bankhead Elementary started sending home a newsletter each week, she knew what was going on and could chat with her daughter about what she learned.

Her daughter used to attend child care all day, so the length of day is actually shorter, but the workload is heavier. Jaelyn is learning and absorbing all the information that comes at her.

As well, coming from a small child care facility, she now has to get used to 20 children around her.

Her mom feels the socialization is a positive aspect, especially since there's just mom and dad to talk to at home, but she was a bit nervous of the number of kids at first.

Jaelyn, however, was ready for school. Says her mom, "She just wanted to learn and read and write letters."

Jaelyn's teacher, Maegan Church, also had her worries about the new format. After teaching kindergarten for four years with half days, she said there were a few things to adjust to.

"It was challenging at first," she admits.

"We had to figure out lunch and recess, but now we're getting used to it. The class has bonded and we're a close group now."

Church sees the advantage of being able to know the students better sooner.

With more time in the day with each of them, she can get to know the little individuals.

The downside, she finds however, is that she has less planning time during the day.

She used to have a mid-day break before the next set of kindergarten students arrived, so she'd have some time to get some work done.

Now, with the students there all day, that time is usually gone.

Still, to give an assessment of the program so far, Church would give it a good mark.

"I wasn't sure at first," she says. "But I think I do like it better. I like the relationship with the kids. I like having the time to get to know them better."

The kindergarten curriculum hasn't been expanded, just the time available to go through it.

In other words, teachers have the same topics to cover, but can spend more time on them or let the children have some recreation time and not move them so quickly.

"Before, I never had the time to cover everything. Now I'm able to do more with more depth," Church says.

"I can fit in more learning or down-time when needed."

For some children, it may be hard at first to adjust, but she says they're all getting used to it.

Many schools have looked at ways to make a smooth transition for the young pupils.

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Over at Hudson Road Elementary, Kate Timmermans says her daughter Kimberly also felt the weight of a full day of studies.

"She comes home some days and she's just exhausted," she says, noting she was apprehensive about her needing quiet time and a nap, like she did at day care.

But, her daughter is getting used to it and, Timmermans laughs, she sleeps better at night.

She also sees the full day as an advantage for the students.

Her daughter may need a bit of extra time to learn and since she is in the classroom all day, the teacher is able to spot more easily learning issues and help the students.

Rebeca Espinosa, whose son Santino just started kindergarten at Raymer Elementary, says, coming from Argentina, she's only known full-day kindergarten. It's normal for her.

"Going full time, they are learning," she says. "And they're interacting with other kids."

Kate de Wynter had her twins Eric and Nathan start at Raymer this year and says they seem fine with the full days and the extra time they have in the program.

"There are no more expectations," she says.

"It's still play-based. They just have more time to explore."

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In Canada, Ontario has taken the most aggressive steps of all the provinces by introducing all-day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds starting this fall.

It's tied into a program intertwined with before- and after-school care as well.

Prince Edward Island introduced full-day kindergarten for four-year-olds this year.

Introducing formal education to younger children is shown to help improve reading, numeracy and literacy skills for children.

While many are concerned about children being too ensconced in formal education too soon and not having enough natural play time, many educators believe the younger minds absorb so much and a play-oriented early program gives them a jump-start on their future learning ability.

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This fall, the district chose 21 of its 30 elementary to implement the all-day kindergarten program, which affects 830 of the 1,430 kindergarten students in the district.

The choice for which schools to launch the program centred on space; it made more sense to install the program at schools with empty classrooms, since the provincial government did not offer extra funding for the first year.

Unfortunately, next year is promising to be more of a challenge to squeeze in the youngsters full time at the nine other schools.

Superintendent Gloster says the project to find more space ended up opening up different possibilities in the district that may address other over-crowding issues.

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