

Full-day kindergarten popularity outstrips plans to pay for it^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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Ms. Solet teaches at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Elementary School in Windsor, one of nearly 600 schools in Ontario to introduce full-day kindergarten this fall.

"They'll be so much more advanced and ready for Grade 1," Ms. Solet said.

That's what Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty is hoping. He's staking a piece of his political future on it, rolling out the earliest phase of the program just one year before a provincial election. It will be years before voters will know whether full-day kindergarten delivers on its promise of higher graduation rates and improved academic outcomes, but in the meantime Mr. McGuinty, who has cast himself as the education premier, will be judged on the impressions of teachers and families.

Teachers have been generally supportive of the program but are already raising concerns about space, with the tightest classroom squeezes yet to come. Enthusiastic parents have driven up enrolment figures, creating new financial pressures. And Ontario residents aren't the only ones watching - other provinces are moving in the same direction.

British Columbia forked over \$424-million to introduce full-day kindergarten to about half its students this fall and will bring the program to the rest of the province next year. Prince Edward Island has jumped right in and spent \$10-million to bring all 1,410 of its kindergarten students into a full-day program this fall. Other provinces, including Quebec and New Brunswick, offer similar full-day programs for young children, but none are quite as ambitious as Ontario's.

Mr. McGuinty's program is unique in that it incorporates two years of revamped curriculum for junior and senior kindergarten, and puts children as young as 3 in full-day classrooms. It also provides the framework for affordable before- and after-school care so that children can stay in one place throughout the work day - an element of the program that has so far been a flop because the government was initially slow to set cost guidelines.

These grand ambitions are part of the reason full-day kindergarten in Ontario is being rolled out in phases and won't be offered in every school across the province until the 2014-2015 school year. An initial \$200-million was set aside for the first phase this school year, and \$300-million for phase two.

The reception has been cautiously warm, especially among parents, but the program's popularity could be its undoing.

Higher-than-expected enrolment at the first schools to offer full-day programs left the Peel District School Board, a large district that serves the suburbs west of Toronto, \$1.3-million in the red, according to its calculations. The board decided recently to delay the rollout of all-day kindergarten to five schools in phase two, scheduled for next fall, unless the government picks up the tab.

Teachers overseeing full-day classrooms "overwhelmingly see value in the program," said Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association president James Ryan.

The union conducted a survey of the nearly 400 of its members who are leading full-day kindergarten classrooms this fall. The consensus among the 194 who replied was that the extra time the program allowed gave children more time for self-directed learning and teachers more time to reinforce lessons.

But some said their classrooms were too full: Nearly a third reported overseeing 26 or more children. Space is also in short supply, with some teachers struggling to cram all their students, an early childhood educator, and all the play areas mandated by the curriculum into a space built to accommodate the old half-day program.

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The province is reviewing school boards' suggestions for where to add the program in the fall of 2012. The first phases were about cherry-picking, finding schools with empty classrooms that could accommodate extra kindergartners and where demand would be high.

With each phase of the rollout, the Education Ministry is looking at increasingly expensive options, with schools that will require retrofits and additions.

The Ontario government has pledged \$245-million so far toward construction and renovations to add kindergarten spaces.

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-reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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