

Province to scrap key piece of full-day kindergarten plan ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Ontario government is expected to scrap plans for boards to run before- and after-school care for full-day kindergarten students, considered a key piece of its early learning program, the Star has learned.

The move is set to be approved at Wednesday's cabinet meeting and follows a massive lobbying effort from daycares, which feared losing business, and from school boards, which didn't want the complications of implementing and operating the programs.

The province's appointed early learning adviser, Charles Pascal, recommended a system of early learning for children from conception to age 12. He has called the extended-day, full-year aspect of the program "absolutely the deal maker" in terms of benefits to children, parents and society.

"It's an incredibly important part of the vision," said Annie Kidder of the advocacy and research group People for Education.

"We're very concerned about what this is going to mean for children and their families," said Eduarda Sousa, executive director of the 2,500-member Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario. "The disruption that already exists is going to continue, but now it will be for a lot more children."

It also means more child care workers will be relegated to shift work without benefits or stable work hours, she added.

Under the change, schools may still have on-site after-school programs, but most will be run by outside operators.

The benefit of school boards providing the care, as envisioned by Pascal, is that the in-class curriculum could be linked to after-school activities. As well, it provides a "seamless day" for children, who would interact with the same staff and face fewer transitions throughout the day, all considered optimal for young learners.

Without it, the province's full-day program is no longer the unique and groundbreaking program it's touted to be, Kidder said.

It also means parents will continue to have to patch together care and programming for their children, she added.

Scarborough parent Manisha Dave-D'Souza, who has a 5-year-old daughter in half-day kindergarten and a 3-year-old son in daycare, says parents want a seamless day for their children.

"It's difficult for children this age to be moving from program to program," she said.

"We have heard that third parties will be providing this, but I'm not sure it makes sense. The issue is who is going to provide the care? How will they ensure the quality? And what about the cost?"

"I don't like all the bits and pieces. It's all very unsettling," she added.

Respected child care researcher Martha Friendly said having school boards oversee an extended-day, full-year program for children from age 4 to 12 was a key feature of Pascal's early learning vision.

"Without it, Ontario is just like every other province that is providing full-day kindergarten," she said. "It's sticking with the status quo."

Full-day kindergarten began this fall for 35,000 of the province's youngest students. The province had planned to phase in the before- and after-school care - which parents pay for - giving boards until 2012 to run programs where demand warranted.

But the after-school aspect got off to a rocky start, with just a handful of boards across the province offering it and none in Toronto.

Many blamed a lack of timely information on cost, high fees and the lack of care during school holidays and summer break.

"To give school boards credit, this could have been implemented a lot better," Kidder said. "I don't think school boards were given enough support right off the bat to be able to deal with it."

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-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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