

Alberta struggles with all-day kindergarten ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

While most of the country is making kindergarten a full-time affair, a handful of school districts in Canada's last big hold-out province, Alberta, have dug into their own pockets to fund all-day programs.

Some districts have introduced full-day kindergarten as a way for high-needs students to get ahead, while others are charging a fee for the optional program, which is popular with working parents. This hodgepodge of early learning makes Alberta unique now that Ontario and British Columbia have begun funding full-day programs.

In Alberta, some districts have been forced to return to the part-time model, despite demand: The Prairie Rose School Division has been cornered by major budget cuts into cancelling its full-day program, a move that has disappointed teachers and parents.

Deputy superintendent Brian Andjelic said the district, which is located near Medicine Hat, began offering full-day programming about five years ago as a way to help high-needs students catch up to their peers. The extra class time wasn't funded by the Ministry of Education so the district charged parents \$210 a year to help cover costs.

"I'm absolutely sad to see it go," he said. "We could really see the benefit it had on our kids and on our staff and parents."

Other districts are following suit with the rest of the country: St. Albert Protestant Schools and the Greater St. Albert Catholic Regional District, two school boards north of Edmonton, began offering full-day kindergarten last fall after parents expressed interest.

The program at the Protestant board is expected to grow to full-day classes next fall at two more schools. Parents pay a fee, which has been raised slightly for next fall, to \$320 a month.

"For some families it just works so much better because it fits their schedule so much better," said Paula Power, a spokeswoman for the district.

A universal full-day approach seems unlikely any time soon in Alberta because kindergarten is optional, and population growth is boom or bust, depending on geography. Boards in Calgary and Edmonton have had to close schools due to declining enrolment numbers, while other boards, many in the suburbs, are bursting at the seams even without full-time kindergartners.

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- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

Region: Alberta ^[2]

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