

The difference a day makes ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Full-day kindergarten is ready to hit full stride in B.C. After an academic year that saw full-day kindergarten introduced to about half of the province's elementary schools, the rest are making the change for 2011-12. About 37,000 youngsters will be in the full-day fold this September as they begin their school careers, up from 22,000 the year before.

With the first year of full-day kindergarten almost complete, teachers, parents and administrators in Greater Victoria are reflecting on how things have gone, and how children have fared under the fledgling system.

"I think most of the parents like the concept," said John Bird, president of the Victoria Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils.

"I would guess that when we go fully onstream with all the schools, they'll be booked."

"Trustees throughout the province have supported full-day kindergarten," said Michael McEvoy, a Greater Victoria school district trustee and president of the B.C. School Trustees Association.

"It's good for kids, in particular for our kids at risk."

A phased-in approach to implementing kindergarten on a full-day basis, a change from the traditional half-day, was announced by the provincial government in 2009. Bringing it in over two years rather than all at once was touted as a way to ease the transition, but critics said the tough economic climate meant the concept was a good idea coming at the wrong time.

They also questioned whether enough money would be provided to do the job properly. Overall provincial funding for changing the kindergarten program is \$280 million, along with \$144 million for new construction and other requirements.

"The reservations the trustees had around it were whether it would be properly funded, because there are general concerns around education funding, and there were also issues around facilities," McEvoy said. "Some classrooms had to be refitted and in other cases space had to be added."

But the money did come through to allow for a solid start-up year, McEvoy said.

"Obviously trustees remain concerned about the level of funding for education generally, but in this case the province addressed some of the central concerns trustees had around making sure it was properly resourced."

Of course, issues around full-day kindergarten have arisen in some districts since September, but nothing that stands out as a major problem, McEvoy said.

"From what I gather from around the province, talking to numbers of boards and trustees, those issues have for the most part been addressed. Provincially, things have actually gone pretty well."

McEvoy said that the "play-based" curriculum being used in the full-day classes - activities where play is used as a learning tool - is a well-researched approach to engaging young minds.

Tara Ehrcke, president of the 1,500-member Greater Victoria Teachers' Association, said the first year of full-day kindergarten has gone "reasonably well," but there are aspects that will be monitored.

"Our big concern is the K-Grade 1 split classes." The association views the combination of kindergarten students with Grade 1s as potentially difficult due to their different curriculums, Ehrcke said. She pointed out that Ontario, which also brought in full-day kindergarten this past September, does not allow K-Grade 1 splits.

The Greater Victoria district has had four split classes in 2010-11, and associate superintendent Sherri Bell said all of them had good outcomes.

Ehrcke said other issue for the teachers' association is ensuring that class size is carefully watched. She said the current maximum is 20 kindergarten students per class, and the B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils passed a motion calling for that to be reduced to 16.

"Of course, we want to see reduced class sizes across the board, but certainly there is a particular need at the early ages."

The choices of which schools were in the first wave of full-day kindergarten were based on recommendations from local boards of

education around the province. Among the factors taken into consideration were the number of English-as-a-second-language students, the number of special-needs students and the overall capacity of each school.

Elementary schools that needed little or no modification made up most of the initial sites for full-day kindergarten. Preparing schools for the second wave began just a few months into the 2010-11 year.

In the Sooke and Saanich school districts, construction on six fronts was underway in December. Receiving additions are the Sooke district's Lakewood, Crystal View, John Stubbs and Happy Valley elementaries, and Brentwood and Keating elementaries in Saanich.

Both districts took the opportunity of the construction period to put in extra features by adding their own funds to the provincial money.

The overall \$11-million investment in Sooke, one of the fastest-growing school districts in B.C., included \$800,000 from the district for more student spaces. In total, Sooke schools will have 19 new classrooms for the 2011-12 year - 10 for full-day kindergarten and nine for an anticipated jump in elementary enrolment.

Sooke schools will also have eight new modular classrooms, bringing the total number of new student spaces to 425.

The total expenditure in Saanich is \$2.9 million, with \$609,000 of that coming from district coffers for a third new classroom at Keating. Provincial funds provided for two new classrooms at both Keating and Brentwood.

The district will end up with 105 new student spaces. The Greater Victoria district has been able to accommodate full-day kindergarten in its current configuration of schools and classrooms with relatively minor changes.

"We didn't have to build new classrooms or add portables," said Bell. "But what we did have to do was open classrooms that were either closed or were used for something else, and make them into kindergarten classrooms."

Government money was provided and disbursed by the district, Bell said.

"We looked at each school individually and determined what each kindergarten class would need."

Teachers were part of a committee that created a basic supply list, filled with everything from books in English and French to display materials, desks and carpets.

"The funds all went directly into classroom resources," Bell said. "And everything was new, which was exciting for the teachers."

Like many of her administrative colleagues around the region, she said the first year of full-day kindergarten has fallen into place well, and has been embraced by most teachers, parents and students she has encountered. Her outlook ties in with comments from leaders of local parent groups, who said they have heard few complaints throughout the past school year.

"There has been no feedback, really, of any kind," Bird said. "Normally that means things are OK."

He said extended kindergarten hours are helpful for families with two working parents who might otherwise have to arrange additional care for their children during parts of the day.

Victoria Martin, co-president of the district parent advisory council in Saanich, said: "We haven't heard anything too negative about it. I was surprised because it's a huge change." She said some parents were concerned going into the school year that their children might have trouble adjusting to a full day in class, but school and district staff have worked with families to address individual situations

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