

Full-day kindergarten a 'success': study ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The introduction of full-day kindergarten in half of B.C. elementary schools last year was a remarkable success, according to a new study, despite the fact the plan was hatched in a hurry and not everyone is convinced it was necessary.

"In my 40 years as an educator, I have not witnessed a major educational change so enthusiastically implemented by both teachers and administrators," researcher Janet Mort, a former school superintendent, states in a report released today as the province prepares for the second phase of implementation, which will see full-day kindergarten offered in every public school in the province.

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While some parents still question the need for full-day kindergarten and wonder if their youngsters are ready to spend five hours a day in a classroom, none of those who participated in Mort's survey favoured a return to the half-day program after their children had experienced the full-day model.

Their concerns were mainly about the transition period - especially for children who had never attended preschool or daycare - and fatigue. Some of the 100 parents who completed the survey suggested the school year should begin with two or three days of kindergarten per week and build to five full days by the end of September.

Mort, who conducted her study for the B.C. Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association, worked with researchers who visited a dozen schools offering full-day kindergarten last year, observing classes and talking to teachers, administrators and principals.

She found teachers were also worried about the transition phase and fretted that some little ones would be exhausted before the day ended. In response, they organized rest times with music and quiet activities, or created a space where children could lie down if they were tired, she writes in *Taking the Pulse: Full-Day K in British Columbia Year One*.

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But after the first two weeks, teachers and principals reported that more than 90 per cent of the children were coping well, and within two to three months, all had adjusted to the full-day program, which emphasizes play-based learning. Teachers call it "the gift of time" because they are no longer in a rush to move from activity to activity, Mort says.

Paul Kershaw, a professor at the University of B.C. who is involved with the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP), had expected full-day kindergarten to be well received, but he was surprised by the enthusiasm.

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What's needed, he said, is a lower student-teacher ratio and a complementary program with before-and after-school care. To get good results, the ratio should be closer to 10: 1, he added.

Full-day kindergarten was proposed by the Liberals in 2008 in a throne speech that also mused about the possibility of kindergarten for threeand four-year-olds.

A study was ordered and its identification of costs, staffing and space needs prompted the government to shelve the idea for a year. Then, in August 2009, former education minister Margaret MacDiarmid announced that full-day K would be introduced in half of B.C. schools in fall 2010.

That left little time for preparation or professional development for teachers, said Mort, who is also a HELP researcher. It also prompted a mini construction boom as the government authorized \$144 million in capital spending to build 140 new modular classrooms, plus additions, renovations and the conversion of 400 surplus classrooms into kindergarten rooms.

That, as well as \$365 million in operating costs for kindergarten over three years, left Surrey mother Linda Stromberg shaking her head.

"There's lots of money for all-day kindergarten, but we don't have [sufficient] money for Grades 1-12," she said. "It's a shame the government didn't address that issue before putting more pressures on the school system."

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The Burnaby-based Kids First Parent Association of Canada, which favours parental care over daycare, accused the Liberals and HELP

researchers of exaggerating the benefits of full-day kindergarten and not consulting parents adequately before launching the program.

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But the teachers who volunteered for Mort's study found most children benefited from the program.

Wendy deGroot, a veteran kindergarten teacher in Nanaimo, agreed with the report's conclusion, saying her students were much further ahead in literacy development this year than in previous years. "I had way more readers than I've ever had," she said in an interview this week.

But she also has concerns, noting in particular the lack of educational assistants to help teachers in the classroom and supervise these tiny children in the playground before school starts and during recess and lunch breaks. DeGroot said she will have 22 children this year, including various special needs - some identified, some not - but she's only been promised 7.5 hours of support a week.

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Mort's report notes similar concerns about inadequate support, especially with special-needs children. She recommends school districts work with StrongStart centres and community organizations to identify physical, social and emotional challenges and arrange support before the children enter kindergarten.

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