

Full-day kindergarten worth growing pains, adviser says ^[1]

Author: Pearson, Matthew

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EXCERPTS:

Despite a sometimes messy implementation, the architect of Ontario's full-day kindergarten initiative says school boards must stay the course and continue rolling out the popular new program.

"Implementation of something as important but also as complex as this will feel, at some times, as messy as a child's first attempt at finger painting," said Charles Pascal, the special adviser on early learning to Premier Dalton McGuinty, who presented his plan in a 2009 report.

"Implementation has its challenges, but if people keep a focus on what's best for kids and families, these other things will actually work out quite well, including issues of space and those kinds of things," he said.

As proof, Pascal pointed to the recent provincial election, suggesting the program's popularity with families is one of the reasons why it wasn't a big issue during the campaign.

"It was about to become an election issue, but one of the parties removed their opposition to it and there's a reason they removed their opposition to it - it's wildly popular," he said.

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The OCDSB is grappling with how best to offer extended day programming - the before-and after-school piece of Pascal's full-day kindergarten plan.

School boards are mandated under the plan to provide the programming themselves or through partnerships with third-party providers.

Some parents and child care activists are concerned the board's eventual decision could negatively affect some of the third-party child care providers that have been already operating before-and after-school programs in dozens of Ottawa public schools for years.

The board has also spent more than \$1 million to add extra kindergarten classes to address overcrowding at a number of schools.

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In his report, Pascal envisioned a "seamless day" - a single program throughout the day in which children don't have transitions to different programs and have no other adults to get used to.

"From the point of view of the child and the parents, there's a single place, a single program and the same adults participating, consistency in their lives when they're not with their parents and guardians," he said.

Although the province later ruled school boards could partner with outside agencies to offer the extended day program, Pascal said third-party providers aren't part of his vision.

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Pascal said some outside providers may have a continued role to play while school boards adjust to their new responsibilities, and added the introduction of full-day kindergarten is the first phase of a plan that will drastically change early childhood education in Ontario for children up to 12 years old.

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Pascal's plan was designed to replace a patchwork model of programs for children in the early years, which left more than one in four children entering Grade 1 significantly behind their peers.

The plan was based on evidence that experiences during the first five years of a child's life have a major bearing on his or her future success in school and the workplace and the understanding that it's more costly and difficult to intervene later than it is to address a child's needs in the early years.

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