

# Time to move on full-day kindergarten <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

Being a cabinet minister can be frustrating. In fact, it can be pure hell when you have a bunch of well-meaning people putting their collective arm on you to get something done. There are occasions when a minister will do the old one step forward and two steps back to avoid answering the question. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

Take Donna Harpauer, minister of education, who told a conference of school trustees that she was "opinionless" about full-day kindergarten "without having had those meaningful conversations."

This is the minister that went to Russia to lead the Canadian delegation at a world conference on early childhood care and education because Saskatchewan was the first province to move all early learning and care into one ministry. That ministry is the one Harpauer has responsibility for.

I'm glad Harpauer was able to share Saskatchewan's experiences in Moscow. Now that she has returned home it is time for her to have an informed opinion.

Well, here's an opinion. We need full-day kindergarten and here's why.

We know that early childhood development in the first seven years of our life sets the foundation for our health, our behaviour and our life of learning.

Some parents will be thinking, "Why would I want to put my child in school even earlier than she already is?"

Full-day kindergarten is not about sitting in desks and reading, writing and arithmetic. There are important links between play and learning. Through play kids learn to get along with each other, develop and improve their speaking and language skills, complete tasks and solve problems and, most of all, they are excited about learning. Children are able to show us what they know and can do, and as they play they learn even more. Children who thrive in Grade 1 have these skills.

Parents will need to decide whether full-day kindergarten is good for their child. But the evidence is compelling.

Too many children are showing up for Grade 1 not ready to learn. Learning gaps present at age five can determine who finishes high school and who doesn't, and who will go onto post-secondary education and who won't.

I know by now some of you will be saying why not just offer full-day kindergarten to vulnerable children? Learning gaps aren't limited to low-income families. Learning gaps are prevalent in moderate, middle class and affluent families, too.

Still others will say, "Full day kindergarten is just free child care, and why should my taxes pay for it?"

Most working families of young children don't have a family member looking after the kids. Their children are in some type of child daycare, either licensed or unlicensed. Most children are already in half-day kindergarten. It is true families won't pay for the other half day, but the research is clear. Citizens save money in the long term by investing in early learning and care. We can pay now or we can pay a lot more down the road.

Provinces and territories are participating in Canadian and international student testing. For many jurisdictions, the results have been disappointing to say the least. Most provinces believe high-quality early learning and care can improve test scores and high school graduation rates. There is a growing gap between those who have and those who don't have in Canada. High school completion and post-secondary education is the key.

Governments are moving to full-day kindergarten. P.E.I., Quebec and New Brunswick already have this type of early learning in place. British Columbia started a phased-in approach in 2010, as did Ontario. Even Alberta Premier Alison Redford promised full-day kindergarten during her leadership bid.

Both the Saskatoon public and Catholic school divisions offer this program in some elementary schools. Our two boards, along with school trustees across the province, have called on the province to provide funding so that all school boards can offer full-day kindergarten.

The argument for good-quality, full-time kindergarten is simple. Children do better in school. Children do better in life. Early learning can save money in the long run on health, justice and social services. The Ministry of Education has all the research. It's time to have a meaningful conversation and get on with it.

-reprinted from the Star Pheonix

**Region:** Saskatchewan <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** kindergarten <sup>[3]</sup>

full-day early learning <sup>[4]</sup>

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