

Vision for full-day kindergarten in Ontario falling short, says expert^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Four years after a provincial report called for a "seamless day of learning" in Ontario schools, prompting the launch of full-day kindergarten, its author says his vision is far from realized.

Dr. Charles Pascal says it is no surprise that school-based daycares are struggling to provide before- and after-care for full-day kindergarten students. It wasn't supposed to be their job in the first place.

"What we recommended was that a single employer, the school board, provide child care for the four- and five-year-old kids," he said. "In most parts of the province, (the report) is not being implemented the way it was supposed to."

After Pascal delivered his 2009 report, the McGuinty Liberals introduced full-day kindergarten and mandated a seamless day of learning for families who need it.

A seamless day differs from a school day bookended by child care, where kids are shuffled to distinct programs run by different adults.

Instead, kids are in the same classroom from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. and are cared for by two early childhood educators and a teacher.

But when school boards balked at running before- and after-school programs, the government amended the legislation to allow them to contract out the service. The vast majority of boards - including those in the GTA - decided to continue using third-party operators.

Now, many of those operators are struggling with the transition to full-day kindergarten, grappling with issues like funding, hiring staff on split shifts and sharing classrooms with teachers.

Meanwhile, in Waterloo and Ottawa, where school boards took on the responsibility of delivering daycare, waiting lists have been reduced to zero and educators say kids are thriving.

"We have no waiting list, because we have no limits on space," said Scott Podrebarac, an administrator with the early learning program at the Waterloo District School Board.

In Waterloo, if there is space in the school, there is space in a child-care program. In Toronto, a total of 18,716 kids are waiting for daycare.

Podrebarac said the response from parents and children had been overwhelmingly positive.

"There's a sameness to it all," he said. "It's not in a gymnasium, or a work space, or a stage on a gym. We're able to access really good spaces, and the full range of materials they access during the school day."

In addition, the board is able to pay early childhood educators more, since they work full-time hours instead of a split shift.

The Toronto District School Board has resisted taking over child care in schools because it has long-standing relationships with in-school daycare providers, said director Donna Quan in a statement.

"It was with that in mind that the board is continuing with the same model to ensure a continuity of service for students and parents," she said, adding that about three-quarters of Toronto schools have on-site child care.

Many parents would prefer to keep trusted in-school daycares that had been around for decades, said Peel board chair Janet McDougald.

"When we have a good provider that's delivering service in the confidence of the community, I don't know why we would try to take that on," she said.

But some child-care providers say the board and province should be doing more to help with the transition to full-day kindergarten.

At Calico Saints Child Care Centre, director Robert Gordon has had to reduce staff and raise fees since full-day kindergarten began last September in Calico Public School near Sheppard Ave. and Jane St.

Because daycares care for kindergarteners only in the morning and afternoon, early childhood educators must work split shifts, cutting their salary and benefits.

"It's unfortunate. There was a bit of grumbling about that, but staff want to keep some employment, so they stayed," said Gordon.

The daycare also lost a government subsidy for the kids, as they are caring for them for less time. As a result, Calico Saints lost \$20,000 last year, and is raising its fees this year to make up for it, Gordon said.

Not all daycares are struggling, but all have had to make changes. At Lambton Park Child Care Centre, director Karin deWinter expanded preschool care to make up for the income lost to full-day kindergarten.

The daycare will have to share classroom space for the first time in September, but deWinter said she doesn't anticipate teachers will be territorial - a common complaint of school-based daycares.

"I would say my experience is the exception, rather than the rule," she said. "I've been really fortunate in my school that we work really well with teachers."

Pascal says he is disappointed the majority of boards opted to maintain the status quo, but remains optimistic his vision will eventually become a reality.

"In Waterloo and Ottawa, where this is happening, it's happening in terms of the way we predicted," he said. "I think over the long haul, people are going to find out about the successful way it's been implemented."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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