

Full-day kindergarten gives kids huge step up, study shows ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Champions of full-day kindergarten across Canada are elated at new research that suggests children who have been in Ontario's new full-day program for two years are dramatically better prepared - two to four times more - than others in their ability to reason and communicate, get along with others and in general knowledge.

The study of nearly 700 Grade 1 children conducted by Queen's and McMaster universities has prompted excitement from proponents. Educator Charles Pascal, who designed Ontario's full-day learning program, said he's doing cartwheels; early childhood advocate Margaret McCain said "it's like winning Olympic gold."

"After 15 years of pushing the importance of early learning, this is the strongest proof we've had to show that it works - it's very exciting for policy makers across the country," said McCain, co-author of a landmark report on early learning with Dr. Fraser Mustard.

The new research was released Tuesday by Ontario Education Minister Liz Sandals, who called it "nothing short of incredible."

It shows children who attended both junior and senior kindergarten all day were stronger in almost all basic learning skills by Grade 1 than those who had only one year in full-day learning or didn't go to full-day at all.

"We always predicted that a play-based full-day program could improve kids' readiness to learn, but it's great to have solid research that shows what you had hoped to achieve has happened," Sandals said of the two-year study. She said also showed the benefits of having early childhood educators involved, "to take advantage of their play-based experience."

Now in the fourth year of being phased in, the full-day kindergarten program has sparked concerns about lack of space and funding and its impact on the demand for child care.

Still, Pascal said, this research on how full-day kindergarten boosts learning "is huge; it shows the program is truly a life-changer. It's cartwheel time for all those early learning educators who are making such a huge difference in the lives of so many children."

The study tracked the skills of 693 Grade 1 pupils from 125 schools in every region of the province, once the program began in 2010. Roughly one-third had been in full-day learning for both junior and senior kindergarten, one-third only for senior kindergarten, and one-third not at all.

As they entered Grade 1, only 4.3 per cent of those in full-day learning for both years appeared to be at risk of not doing well because of weak language skills or poor cognitive development, compared with 14.8 per cent of those with just one year of full-day learning, and 16.4 per cent of those with no full-day learning.

Similarly, only 5.2 per cent of children with two years of full-day kindergarten showed weak social skills, compared with 7.7 per cent of children with one year of the program and 10.5 per cent of children with no full-day experience at all.

With respect to general knowledge and communication, only 5.6 per cent of children with two years in full-day kindergarten were at risk, compared with 7.7 per cent of those with one year of full-day kindergarten and 10.5 per cent of those with no full-day learning at all.

MPP Lisa MacLeod, education critic for the provincial Progressive Conservatives, noted the government has not released the full study, which she said the public needs "to make sure we are getting the best value for our dollar."

"In order for the government to have any credibility on this," she said, "they should have allowed a third party to do the study and a third party to release it, warts and all."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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