

Minister touts success, daycare advocates question full-day kindergarten ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

As children across Ontario return to school, the provincial government is touting the success of its yet-to-be fully implemented full-day kindergarten policy.

But daycare advocates say the program is making it difficult for parents of younger kids to get daycare.

"FDK is working," Education Minister Liz Sandals said Tuesday morning during a press conference at Ogden Junior Public School in downtown Toronto.

Sandals made the remarks while announcing the results of a study involving 600 students who were enrolled in the first two years of full-day kindergarten.

The study, done in partnership with Queen's University and McMaster University, suggests children enrolled in full-day kindergarten were less likely to experience inhibited learning, health or behavioural problems that could interfere with learning when entering Grade 1.

The bold education policy is scheduled to be fully implemented across Ontario in September 2014 despite problems with budget and infrastructure.

The program was one of the few instances in which Premier Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government ignored the Drummond Report, which suggested scrapping or at least delaying the full implementation of the program.

Some school boards are finding it difficult to house the sudden influx of young students but Sandals said Tuesday that school boards are well equipped to deal with "construction delays."

"They'll find another school that has some empty space," Sandals said. "They'll temporarily put a portable on the property, maybe there's a church basement down the road that they can rent for a month."

What is FDK's effect on daycare?

But space is also hard to come by with childcare across Ontario, daycare advocate Andrea Calver said in an interview Tuesday. While full-day kindergarten was supposed to open up badly needed space in daycares across the province, Calver said the program is inadvertently making daycare more expensive and harder to access.

"Moving four and five year old children into the school system means that we're asking child care centres to specialize in younger children," Calver, a spokesperson for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care said. "When we specialize in younger children, they require more staff."

With four- and five-year-olds moving out of daycares, a larger percentage of the kids will be made up of infants - an age range, Calver says, requires more staff and more money. The solution, she said, is a significant increase in funding from the provincial government.

"There are tens of thousands of children that need childcare, but their parents need affordable childcare," she said. "The fees for childcare are more than what the average family can afford."

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