

Full-day kindergarten great, but there are growing pains, report finds ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 18 Oct 2013

EXCERPTS:

A report for the Ontario government on full-day kindergarten says the academic impact of the \$1.5 billion program will likely fade over time, but that there are other ways to measure its success.

The full report was posted online on Thursday after portions of it were released on the first day of school that showed solid gains among 4- and 5-year-old students who were up to four times above kids in half-day programs in communication and social skills, general knowledge and reasoning.

Education Minister Liz Sandals has called the improvements "nothing short of incredible."

Full-day kindergarten is now in its fourth year, and will be fully implemented in elementary schools across the province by next fall for an estimated 265,000 kids.

While glowing, the report does note a couple of areas of concern for the full-day program, including teacher-early childhood educator working relationships - the two are to work alongside each other with the full-day kids - and concerns that classes are big in smaller-than-usual kindergarten classrooms.

MPP and Tory education critic Rob Leone said the study shows there's not a huge drop in the percentage of children considered vulnerable, despite being enrolled in the pricey program.

"Certainly the concern lies with what's going to happen three, four, five, 10 years down the road, in terms of whether standardized test scores are going to go up, are graduation rates going to go up," he said.

"... Over the long term, will the effects be minimal. I'm happy there is improvement - any improvement is good - but whether these things will last I think the proof is in the pudding."

He said children's home environment is important, "and there's a strong case that investing in literacy and numeracy and skills upgrading for parents will help minimize these things over time."

A recent study out of the University of Manitoba found that by high school, there is no difference in academic performance between students who attended a full-day program and those who were enrolled half days. Often touted as a program to "shrink the gap" between children from lower socio-economic households, it does nothing of the sort, researchers found.

However, one of the study's authors said while academically it doesn't make a difference, further study is needed on the emotional and social impacts it has.

The full-day study, by researchers at Queen's and McMaster Universities, says teacher-ECE teams "were not fully leveraging the collective expertise of two professions" though overall it had no effect on students' achievements.

Zeenat Janmohamed, an early childhood researcher at the Atkinson Centre at the University of Toronto, said she's seen a mix of "positive and some challenging relationships" and said principals are the key to setting the foundation for collaboration, though that has received little attention.

In some cases, early childhood educators - trained in child development - are treated as a teacher helper.

Providing them with time during the school day to work with teachers to plan lessons, and also time for professional development - as teachers are entitled to - would help.

"It's an extra-cost item, it's not significant, but it is something that would support the educator team ... and it would alleviate some of the concerns that parents have in the study as well."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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