

Is full-day kindergarten making the grade? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When Ontario gambled on full-day kindergarten in 2010, critics called it costly babysitting the deficit-plagued province couldn't afford.

Advocates - and many parents, freed of daycare costs - cheered.

Now, with the final phase of full-day kindergarten's (FDK) \$1.5-billion, five-year roll-out to 265,000 kids coming this fall, the province has four years under its belt to judge whether day-long schooling before Grade 1 is making a difference.

The early acid test will come this spring, when the first crop of FDK-educated kids will take their standardized provincial tests in Grade 3.

Full-day kindergarten was a parent pleaser for the Liberal government, freeing many parents from daycare costs but ravaging the daycare industry - especially in rural areas, with fewer kids to care for - by siphoning off kindergarten-age kids.

"If you take away the kindergarten children the whole (business) model is disrupted," said Greg Humphreys of the Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario.

At school, the early studies on FDK's impact are mixed - while it's working in some crucial child developmental areas, the academic advantage isn't so clear.

The most compelling study is by the University of Toronto, where researcher Janette Pelletier is comparing 525 pupils - some in FDK, and others in a half-day kindergarten program.

Pelletier, a psychology and human development professor, found when it comes to the "cornerstones" of a child's developmental readiness - vocabulary and self-regulation, or focus - FDK pupils far outpaced their half-day counterparts.

"You need vocabulary for all other learning in school and self-regulation is what allows children to pay attention, to concentrate, to focus on what it is they're supposed to do. So those are very big and positive findings," she said.

When it came to academics, those who began FDK at age four started ahead of kids in half-day kindergarten in reading, writing and number knowledge, but had lost the advantage by the end of Grade 1.

Why?

Well, Pelletier doesn't know.

It could be FDK pupils aren't transitioning well from play-based learning to more traditional, sit-at-your-desk-and-do-worksheets learning. Pelletier wants to keep following the two groups to see if FDK pupils regain the edge.

Half-day kindergarten will vanish in Ontario this fall with FDK's final roll-out.

Critics say Ontario, still facing a crushing \$11.3-billion budget deficit, can't afford the costly program. Economist Don Drummond told the province to scrap it when he went through the books -- his calls were ignored -- and political critics say the benefits aren't big enough to justify the costs.

But others insist the province can't afford not to invest in early learning and the payoff will come down the road.

"Universal public education for children is expensive, but it's money well spent. It's going to have a payoff over the entire lifetime of the child," said Craig Alexander, chief economist at TD Bank Group.

For every dollar spent, the economy gets back between \$1.50 to \$3, he said. That return jumps into the double digits for disadvantaged children.

Of all comparable Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, Canada ranks last on early learning spending, Alexander has found. He cites research by economist Pierre Fortin, who found Quebec's government-subsidized child-care

system pays by allowing more mothers to work, generating more tax revenue for the province than the subsidy costs. But while some elementary school teachers have changed how they teach FDK-educated pupils, who are learning more than the kindergartners before them, the shift hasn't been consistent, said a former London-area public school board director.

"There's still Grade 1 programs where you walk in and desks are in rows or small groups and that is not paralleling what is happening in FDK classes," said Bill Tucker, who now teaches at Western University.

"So there has to be a stronger tie-in to a seamless transition from kindergarten to Grade 1."

Education Minister Liz Sandals calls FDK the "most significant transformation" in Ontario education in a generation. Like anything new, it has "issues to address."

One elementary teacher, who's taught pupils before and since FDK began, said she's noticed those with FDK ask deeper-thinking questions and explain their answers.

"Now it's, 'I think the car will go faster because I know this ramp is really high here.' ... I've never really had kids tell me the why piece so clearly before," said Carrie Kernohan, a Grade 1 teacher at Aberdeen public school in London.

Kernohan is part of a provincially-funded project to give primary teachers extra training so they understand the new type of pupils entering their Grades 1 and 2 classes from FDK, and the skills they bring.

Pelletier's research also found FDK parents believed their kids were more ready to learn. They also reported less daily stress than half-day kindergarten parents.

"You have to look beyond just a child's academic outcomes in one particular grade," she said, calling it "a big-system picture."

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