

Experts still divided over benefits of full-day kindergarten four years after roll out ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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ABOUT THE STUDIES

Several have looked at the phased-in rollout of FDK. Researchers at Queen's and McMaster universities separately studied the first two years, which began in 2010, while the University of Toronto has been comparing the effects on staff, parents and children in both half-day and full-day kindergarten since the latter began.

KEY FINDINGS

Queen's/McMaster study:

- Pupils in high-needs schools benefitted most.
- Those with special needs suffered, not enough extra support.
- FDK pupils entered Grade 1 ready to learn
- Before FDK, 27% of kids going into Grade 1 were vulnerable, ranking in the bottom 10th percentile on a scale measuring everything from general knowledge to physical health and well-being. Kids identified as vulnerable went down after FDK.

University of Toronto study:

- Compared 525 pupils, some in FDK, others in half-day program.
- FDK parents have less stress than half-day parents; believe their children are more ready to learn than others.
- Those who started FDK at age 5 outpaced those in half-day in vocabulary and focus for the first three years and started ahead of the half-day group in reading and writing, but didn't maintain their edge in number knowledge.
- Those who began FDK at age 4 were ahead of the half-day group academically, but gradually lost that advantage by end of Grade 1

WHAT TWO EXPERTS SAY

Who: Janette Pelletier

What: Lead researcher, University of Toronto study

Overall: While the findings are mixed, Pelletier said more research is needed. "It's important to follow these kids for a longer period of time," said Pelletier, a psychology and human development professor.

The findings on vocabulary and what Pelletier calls "self-regulation" - a child's ability to focus - are key. They're "cornerstones" of developmental readiness.

"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."

What's more, as pupils enter Grade 1, they leave the play-based learning model for one that's more focused on work sheets and desk work.

"It's not that the Grade 1 classes are bad or the teachers aren't amazing, because I'm sure they are - it's just a different system," she says.

While some may use her research as proof FDK isn't paying off, Pelletier says the big picture is that FDK kids are doing better than those in

half-day in key areas and their families also benefit.

"You have to look beyond just a child's academic outcomes in one particular grade... It's a big-system picture that I feel is the benefit of the full-day program," she says.

Who: Bill Tucker

What: Former Thames Valley District school board director, now associate education professor at Western University

Overall: FDK pupils are learning much more in the new setup, but their transition to Grade 1 isn't always so seamless.

In FDK, there are fewer desks and more open space for kids to play and explore. But that changes in Grade 1, with more focus on desk work and sitting still longer.

While some Grade 1 teachers have changed how they teach pupils from FDK, opening up their classes to simulate FDK's play-based learning, that isn't always the case.

"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," he says. "There has to be a stronger tie-in to a seamless transition from kindergarten to Grade 1."

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

BUT IS IT WORTH IT?

When economist Don Drummond went through Ontario's books with a scalpel for cost-cutting recommendations to help the Liberals rein in a province deep in the red, his sharp blade landed on FDK: Can't afford it, he told the government.

But others say Ontario can't afford not to invest in early learning.

"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," says Craig Alexander, chief economist at TD Bank Group.

For every dollar spent, the economy gets back \$1.50 to \$3 - a return that jumps into the double digits for disadvantaged kids, he says.

Of all comparable OECD countries, Canada ranks last in early learning spending, Alexander has found. He cites research by economist Pierre Fortin, who found Quebec's government-subsidized child-care system pays because it allows more mothers to return to work, generating more tax revenue than the subsidy costs.

He calls Pelletier's findings disappointing and inconsistent with international findings that kids with high-quality, early childhood education do much better.

Ontario's FDK program is still in its infancy, he notes.

"One survey just isn't enough."

A TEACHER'S TAKE

Will plants grow with light from glow sticks?

What's inside a battery that makes it work?

Grade 1 teacher Carrie Kernohan has been answering those questions from her pupils at Aberdeen public school in London - graduates of FDK.

She never got those questions from pre-FDK pupils.

But Kernohan has changed her teaching approach to fall in line with the new crop of learners in her class.

Think fewer worksheets at the desk and more group exploration.

"They're researchers," she says. "They want to find out, they want to ask and they know when they ask those deep-thinking questions, we're going to work on it together to find out the answer."

Now, she has a class of engaged, budding minds that love school and are eager to share what they know.

"Now it's, 'I think the car will go faster because I know this ramp is really high here.' They can explain their thinking. I've never really had kids tell me the why piece so clearly before," she says.

Kernohan is part of a provincially-funded project at the Thames Valley District school board to help Grades 1 and 2 teachers understand FDK-educated children.

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THE FALLOUT FOR DAY CARE OPERATORS

FDK has hit the day care industry hard.

In urban centres, there's enough children to fill spots lost to FDK, but that's not the case in rural areas, said Greg Humphreys of the

Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario. And those day cares are closing.

"If you take away the kindergarten children, the whole (business) model is disrupted," he says,

Because the ratio of staff to infants is one to three, day cares lose money caring for infants but make it up with older kids, where the staffing ratio is less.

The industry also lost qualified staff when many early childhood educators left to work for school boards offering better pay and benefits.

"In a rural area you might not have qualified staff to fill those positions, so obtaining qualified staff is a big problem," says Humphreys.

POLITICAL POINTS

Critics like Rob Leone, the Progressive Conservative education critic at Queen's Park, have decried FDK's cost and said its gains don't justify its tab, especially when the results don't show vast improvement.

But Education Minister Liz Sandals calls FDK the nearly \$25-billion education system's "most significant transformation" in a generation. Like anything new, she says, it has "issues to address." Ontario began tackling those issues with training for elementary teachers about FDK and is looking at how to roll play-based learning into the curriculum to help pupils move from kindergarten into Grade 1, she says.

- reprinted from the St. Catharines Standard

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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