

Full-day kindergarten impacts grade 1,2^[1]

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EXCERPTS

While full-day kindergarten is the newest learning experience for Ontario's youngest students, it's been an education for the province's primary teachers, too.

With the final phase of the full-day rollout happening this week, school boards say that over the past five years of implementation, they've had one big kinder surprise: teachers in Grades 1 and 2 now find their lessons no longer work for children steeped in play-based learning - kids who are more confident, ask more questions and who are used to setting the agenda in the classroom.

The Ontario government now plans to expand play- and inquiry-based learning throughout the elementary years as part of its new action plan.

"There really is a need to revisit the curriculum for Grade 1 and subsequent grades," said Michael Barrett, president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association. "As these super-kids move throughout the system, all the curriculum is going to be a year out of date; they are going to be that much further ahead."

The province's education ministry said that during consultations to develop its action plan, "a major theme we heard . . . was to extend the play-based learning of full-day kindergarten into elementary education," said Lauren Ramey, spokesperson for Education Minister Liz Sandals.

". . . We have already begun that process by including Grade 1 and 2 teachers in annual ministry training sessions for educators about the kindergarten program to support their professional learning."

Studies have shown that Ontario children in full-day have better vocabularies, reasoning skills and general knowledge, as well as stronger communication and social skills.

But academic benefits such as reading, writing and numbers aren't evident by the end of Grade 1, which has some wondering if kids struggle with the transition to sitting at a desk in Grade 1 - a routine that is starting to be phased out.

"As we are working through the phases of full-day kindergarten we are adjusting the expectations of Grade 1 students, based on the fact that kindergarten students are coming with skills that in the past weren't developed until the first few months of Grade 1," said Colleen Russell-Rawlins, executive superintendent of early years learning for the Toronto District School Board.

"The idea of sitting at their desks for long periods of time won't work for these students," added Sheryl Robinson Petrazzini, the board's central co-ordinating principal, early years.

Rather than being teacher-driven, these students want to explore answers to questions and issues they are interested in, said Jack Nigro, superintendent of curriculum services for the Halton Catholic board.

"Grade 1 teachers inherit the products of our full-day program. Kids seem a little different in terms of what we're used to . . . there's been a bit of a shift there."

That's something York Region kindergarten teacher Joanne Marie Babalis has found with her students, who are "much more involved as active participants in their own learning process . . . it's not about educators filling them up with knowledge, it's them coming with questions and ideas learning alongside the educators."

She began an inquiry last December after one student brought in lemon seeds, wondering if fruit would grow. It turned into a huge examination of other types of seeds, how best to grow gardens and lasted until the end of the school year.

"The most powerful aspect is the improvement in their engagement - they are completely engrossed in everything they do in the classroom and can't wait to come back the next day."

The full-day program has had its share of problems: boards have complained of insufficient funding to deliver it and some schools have had to move older students into portables or other schools to make room.

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