

Ontario's full-day kindergarten splits classes – and raises concerns ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario's full-day kindergarten children are being squeezed into split-grades, prompting questions about whether the province's youngest students are fully benefiting from the Liberal government's much-touted play-based curriculum and leaving classroom teachers coping with the fallout.

A ministry briefing note marked "confidential advice to minister," obtained by The Globe and Mail through freedom-of-information legislation, showed that 261 classrooms in the past academic year housed both full-day kindergarten and Grade 1 students.

Educators contacted by The Globe said various boards, including in Toronto, York and London, have split classes again this fall due to budget pressures.

Split classes have become increasingly popular across the country and there is debate over whether learning suffers when students of different ages are in the same classroom. In British Columbia, government and teachers are locked in a fierce battle, with class composition as one of the key sticking points. While many teachers say they can manage split classes, balancing the needs of students with special needs in different grades is difficult.

Teachers in Ontario have expressed concern that the free-moving, play-based kindergarten program is quite different from the more structured Grade 1 curriculum.

Also, a split classroom could potentially hold a range of ages, from four-year-olds to seven-year-olds, a huge gap as children learn important social skills.

"It's very difficult to run one class because they are on such dramatically different curricula," said James Ryan, president of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association. "When you have to split the time like that, it does water the curriculum down."

A key component of the province's full-day junior and senior kindergarten program is that it allows children time to explore through play. The theory is that children can retain more information and will ask important questions on their own. Areas of the classrooms are regularly updated with new toys and play stations. The Grade 1 curriculum, meanwhile, is more structured and students spend a lot more time at their desks. Some believe that running both grades out of one classroom could mean less play among kindergartners because of space constraints and the need to teach two separate groups.

But not everyone is worried. Holly Gerrits, manager of full-day kindergarten at the Thames Valley District School Board, which serves London and the surrounding area, said the district has about 30 full-day kindergarten-Grade 1 split classrooms. Ms. Gerrits said the curriculums for the two grades may be different but they both focus on inquiry-based learning and, in the end, the expectations are similar.

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