

# Funded full-day kindergarten likely to remain shelved: education minister <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Alberta's education minister said fulfilling a three-year-old Tory promise to introduce fully-funded all-day kindergarten would be "ideal" but improbable due to a slump in oil prices that threaten to plunge the province's finances into disarray.

"In straightened financial circumstances, such as we're facing, to provide funding for all-day kindergarten or a variety of other issues that some people may see as just as important in their mind as all-day kindergarten ... would be a challenge," Gordon Dirks told the Herald in a year-end interview.

During the 2011 PC leadership race, Redford pledged to implement full-day kindergarten, a program the province estimates would have an operating cost of \$200 million.

But the government has repeatedly delayed that promise, often citing poor economic conditions. In recent weeks, Premier Jim Prentice has warned that oil prices, which have dropped nearly 50 per cent since June, could create a massive \$16-billion fiscal hole over the next three years.

So, in all likelihood, full-day kindergarten will remain a pipe dream until oil rebounds.

"In an ideal world, it would be good if funding could be provided for any school board who wanted to move forward on providing resources for at-risk kids for all-day kindergarten and encouraging them to do that," Dirks added. "We don't live in an ideal world right now."

While many school boards across Alberta, including those in Calgary, offer some full-day kindergarten programs, the province only provides funding for half-day programs, which requires boards to allocate money from their budgets.

Julie Hrdlicka, outreach co-ordinator for Public Interest Alberta, said full-day kindergarten helps kids - particularly ones from low-income families that can't afford costly early childhood care - achieve equal footing with their classmates by the time they enter Grade 1.

"The evidence has shown it gives those kids a boost ... so they're starting at the same place and that's important in regards to academic success for kids," Hrdlicka said. "But it's also important in regards to self-esteem for kids who are coming from lower income families, that they're at the same level as everybody else and not struggling."

A 2012 study by the Ontario government and the universities of Queen's and McMaster found kids enrolled in full-day kindergarten were better prepared to enter Grade 1 and were more successful in class in several key areas, such as language and cognitive development, compared to kids with no full-day kindergarten instruction.

"We don't have an early childhood education comprehensive strategy in this province, so not every child has access to quality, affordable child care," Hrdlicka said. "And because they don't, they're going into kindergarten at a level that can be lower than a lot of other kids. Full-day kindergarten would lay out a fair, level playing field for children."

NDP education critic Deron Bilous said the PCs won a majority government in the 2012 provincial election in part because of Redford's full-day kindergarten promise and has a duty to fulfil that commitment "regardless of whether we got four new MLAs who were elected in the byelections."

"I understand that with oil as low as it is we are in tough economic times," Bilous said. "But we know oil prices are volatile, look at our history, prices go up and prices go down. A responsible government will save in the good times and plan to have buffers when oil drops."

"The good times don't stick around forever and the PCs should have done a better job managing Alberta's revenue and resources in the good times to help whether the bad times."

**Region:** Alberta <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** full-day early learning <sup>[4]</sup>

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