

Waterloo region kindergarten care earns top praise ^[1]

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A scholar has high praise for how this community provides extended care to thousands of kindergarten students, before and after school.

"Waterloo is, in fact, a leader across the country," said Zeenat Janmohamed, an education researcher out of the University of Toronto.

"Families understand that if they move to Waterloo, they have access to the type of programs that very few communities in Ontario do. I think in that way you've provided as a region an attraction to families with young children."

Janmohamed is among the authors of a new study into the implementation of all-day kindergarten, a key government initiative costing Ontario taxpayers \$1.5 billion a year.

The study surveyed 386 local parents. While it points to implementation challenges, it reveals that parents like sending their children to all-day kindergarten and to extended-care school programs because:

- They feel it prepares their children "socially and academically" for school.
- It simplifies their lives and lets some parents return to work. The report points to a reduction in marital stresses that "stem from finding and paying for child care, transferring children from school to caregiver and juggling drop-off and pickup times."

"The issue around family stress, and the reduction in marital stress, was a surprise to us, but I think a good finding, an unexpected finding," Janmohamed said.

The study does not examine if all-day kindergarten, derided by critics as child care at public expense, helps students succeed. Mixed research points to academic results fading over time. Regardless, the study states: "Universal kindergarten is a truly remarkable accomplishment. Few innovations will make as much difference for children's outcomes."

"I don't think it's a political statement," Janmohamed said. "I think it's a policy statement." She believes all-day kindergarten will be shown to improve student outcomes.

"The jury is still out on full-day kindergarten," said Mary-Lou Mackie, executive superintendent with the Waterloo Region District School Board. "It's too early to tell what its long-term impact is."

Mackie is gratified by praise for extended-care kindergarten programs, available at public and Catholic schools. Families pay up to \$24.50 a day.

Increasing the number of available spaces required collaboration among school boards, independent care providers, municipal children's services, and child development scholars. This did not happen without controversy. "There's been good learning on everybody's side," Mackie said.

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