

EARLY YEARS

A Report from People for Education

To establish stable, prosperous, equitable societies, we have to make equality of opportunity for all young children a key policy of our societies.¹

Every year, People for Education conducts an Annual School Survey. Distributed to all of Ontario's 4,900 publicly funded elementary and secondary schools, the survey asks principals for information on resources and programs in the school and about the school's connection with its community.

In 2012, 1018 schools responded to the survey. This report is an excerpt from the **2012 Annual Report on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools**.

FULL DAY KINDERGARTEN PROSPERS WHILE CHILD CARE STRUGGLES

This year, Ontario's full-day kindergarten (FDK) program was expanded to reach approximately 50,000 4- and 5-year-olds in nearly 800 elementary schools.

That number will grow to 120,000 children next year.

Full-day kindergarten is one element of the early learning strategy laid out in the report *With Our Best Future in Mind*, by former Special Advisor on Early Learning, Charles Pascal. The strategy was supposed to include seamless, extended-day programs, and bring together the current "chaotic mix" of childcare, family support services and education for children aged 4 to 12.²

Where FDK has been implemented in Ontario, early research³ and feedback from principals has been overwhelmingly positive.

The difference in what the children are learning and retaining is phenomenal. The FDK is fabulous! Our students who come from at-risk families have benefited the most.

Elementary school principal, Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB

QUICK FACTS FOR 2011/12

- 33% of elementary schools offer full-day, every-day kindergarten.
- 30% of schools report having onsite childcare for children under four and 47% for kindergarten-aged children.
- Schools with higher average family incomes are more likely to have extended-day programs for children 6 years of age and older.

On the other hand, Ontario received a failing grade on the Early Childhood Education Index released as part of the *Early Years Study 3*. The index emphasizes that full-day kindergarten alone is not enough for the youngest children in the school system, or their families.⁴ In particular, concerns were raised about destabilization in the broader childcare sector and a lack of availability of before- and after-school care for children in grades 1-6.

FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN

Results from this year's survey indicate that one in three elementary schools across Ontario currently provide FDK for children 4 to 5 years old. Schools with lower levels of family income are more likely to have FDK, and 80% of schools in Northern Ontario now have FDK. This reflects the government's commitment to prioritizing the program for children growing up in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, prior to full implementation of FDK in all schools by September 2014.

The goals of the FDK model are to help children make a smoother transition to Grade 1 and improve their prospects for success in school and beyond.⁵ The potential benefits of strong kindergarten programs include improved achievement, fewer grade repetitions, less draw on special education, lower high school drop-out rates, higher post-secondary enrolment and increased future employment earnings.⁶ Early years programming is particularly beneficial to children potentially at risk of lagging behind their peers, including English Language Learners, children growing up in poverty, and those from some immigrant backgrounds.⁷

EXTENDED LEARNING AND AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

New provincial policy requires school boards to provide programs for kindergarten children before and after school, and on holidays if 20 or more parents request it. Boards can charge fees for these extended-day programs, and they can use “third parties” to provide the care. The policy does not require boards to provide these programs for older children (up to 12 years), but they “may.”⁸

Results from this year’s survey show that 30% of elementary schools currently have some form of extended-day or childcare programs for children under 4, and 47% of schools have programs for 4- to 5-year-olds. Most boards have not pursued the seamless-day model proposed by Pascal. One of the only boards to implement the full model has been the Waterloo Region District School Board. In Waterloo, teachers and early childhood educators in many schools share a classroom, and children can attend an integrated program that starts at 7:30 a.m. and finishes at 6 p.m. The results of the program have been very positive.⁹

EARLY INTERVENTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Family-support programs like Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, Ontario Early Years Centres and Best Start Centres are an important component of strong early childhood education. In these programs, parents and children can play together, participate in learning and health activities and, in some cases, get referrals and assessments. This year’s survey shows that these types of programs exist in 31% of elementary schools.

INEQUITABLE ACCESS TO EXTENDED-DAY PROGRAMS FOR SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Just over half of schools say they have some form of before- or after-school program for children 6 to 12 years old, but less than half report that they have care available both before and after school. Many other reports have shown there is a significant shortage of licensed programs for this age group.¹⁰

Worryingly, this year’s findings show that extended-day programs are more likely to be offered in schools with higher levels of family income. The unequal and more limited access for lower-income families is a troubling finding that reflects the fact that extended programs are not based solely on parental demand, but rather, and perhaps more importantly, on the ability of families to pay for such services. Subsidies for childcare for older children are highly restricted.

One in three schools that did not have extended programs report that they had received requests from parents to offer such programs.

THE FUTURE OF CHILDCARE

The introduction of full-day kindergarten has created significant challenges for the childcare sector. The City of Toronto, for example, forecasts a loss of 23% of childcare spaces as a result of the loss of 4- and 5-year-old children.¹¹ Recent funding increases for childcare may assist somewhat, but a \$90 million increase is a long way from the \$287 million recommended by the Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare.¹²

LIMITING ECONOMIC BENEFITS

A recent study concluded that every dollar invested in early learning and childcare will immediately increase the economy's output and provide long-term benefits through increased earnings (primarily the mother's), improved health outcomes for children and reduced social costs.¹³ However, the central elements of the Pascal report—including seamless extended-day programs for 4- and 5-year-olds and extended-day and year-round programs for 6- to 12-year-olds—need to be in place for the benefits of the early years strategy to be truly realized.

The implementation of FDK has been heralded as a success by schools and has reached many children in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. But the provision of extended-day programs remains patchy, and is marred by inequitable access.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Providing children with the supports and enrichment they need when they are very young has a positive impact throughout their lives—on their health, well-being, learning, and capacity to become contributing adults.

People for Education recommends that:

- the province enact regulations so that only school boards, municipalities and not-for-profit agencies are permitted to operate extended-day programs in schools.
- the province mandate, with appropriate funding and support, that school boards offer extended-day programs for children from 4 to 12 years of age.
- the province develop policy and funding to ensure that municipal and not-for-profit operators have access to space in schools, at cost, for full-year, extended-day programs for children from 4 to 12 years of age.
- the province mandate boards to establish collaborative policies and practices, including joint professional development for teachers and early childhood educators, so that extended-day programs are truly seamless.
- the province work with other levels of government to provide support to the childcare sector, to help them offset revenue losses associated with full-day kindergarten, and improve the affordability of childcare.

NOTES

- 1 McCain, Margaret N., Mustard, J. Fraser, Shanker, Dr. Stuart(2007). EARLY YEARS STUDY 2 Putting Science into Action http://www3.thestar.com/static/PDF/070326_EYS2.pdf
- 2 Pascal C.E. (2009). *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*. Retrieved from: http://www.ontario.ca/en/initiatives/early_learning/ONT06_018872.
- 3 J. Pelletier. (2012). *FDELK Research Year 1*. Retrieved from http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/UserFiles/File/Events/2012-04-11%20-%20Task%20Force/Pelletier_FDELK_Research_Year_1_ATF.pdf.
- 4 McCain, M.N., Mustard, J.F. & McCuaig, K. (2011). *Early Years Study 3: Making decisions, taking action*. Toronto: Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation. Retrieved from: <http://earlyyearsstudy.ca/download-early-years-study-3>.
- 5 Ontario Ministry of Education. (2010). *The Full-Day Early Learning — Kindergarten Program, 2010-2011, Draft Version*. Retrieved from: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/kindergarten.html>.
- 6 Fairholm, R. (2010). *Early Learning and Care Impact Analysis*. Milton, Ontario: The Centre for Spatial Economics. Retrieved from: http://www.cccf-fcsge.ca/projects/documents/CSE_EarlyLearningandCareImpactAnalysis.pdf.
- 7 Dhuey, E. (2011). Who Benefits From Kindergarten? Evidence From the Introduction of State Subsidization. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 33, 3-22.
- 8 See *Education Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c.E.2, s. 259; see also O.Reg. 225/10.
- 9 For an interesting video, see <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/Resources/Videos/index.html>.
- 10 See, e.g., Middle Childhood Matters/Social Planning Toronto. (2009). Inventory of full-week afterschool programs in Toronto. Retrieved from http://middlechildhoodmatterstoronto.on.ca/pdfs/Middle_Childhood_Matters_January_2009.pdf.
- 11 City of Toronto. (2012). *Support child care in Toronto*. Retrieved from <http://www.toronto.ca/supportchildcare/pdf/brochure.pdf>.
- 12 Quality Early Learning Network. (2002). *Solutions: How the Ontario Government can rescue and ensure the viability and quality of the early childhood system*. Retrieved from <http://www.macauleycentre.org/Solutions-QELNFundingPaperFeb12.pdf>.
- 13 See note 6.



People for Education is a registered charity that works to support public education in Ontario's English, French and Catholic schools.

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