

Expanding access to full-day Kindergarten: Pay attention to the details

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The devil is in the details. This phrase looms large in all the discussions among early childhood educators, K-12 teachers, school trustees, and parents about the design of an expanded entitlement to Kindergarten for five-year-olds, and additional programming, eventually, for four- and three-year-olds.

In our response to the provincial Early Childhood Learning Agency's consultation paper on this topic, First Call coalition partners noted:

"Early childhood advocates have long called for a commitment by the provincial government to universal, quality, publicly funded, and community-based services for young children. If done properly, First Call partners believe that the proposed expansion of Kindergarten and pre-Kindergarten programming for three- to five-year-olds has the potential to serve young children and their families well.We are particularly interested in strengthening the shared understanding that care and education are not separate concepts and that quality childcare programs for young children provide both."

With regard to full-school day Kindergarten for five-year-olds, doing it properly means ensuring programs:

- are designed around learning through play and other developmentally appropriate activities that support the holistic development of the child.
- are staffed by adequately compensated, qualified staff with expertise in early childhood care and education.
- include parents/caregivers as knowledgeable partners in a "shared caring" relationship.
- connect with community-based and other government supports for families.
- address the need for childcare outside of school hours for working parents, recognizing the importance of an integrated learning and care environment in one location for young children as the ideal.
- respect children's views and their individual, cultural, and linguistic identities.
- include and support children with special needs.
- provide sufficient age-appropriate outdoor playground space and supervision.
- are optional.

These are the first set of details we must pay attention to. They are based on solid research evidence about child development, the benefits of young children's participation in high quality programs, including full school-day Kindergarten, and the international trend to recognize children's entitlement to quality programming in their early years.

But there is a second set of details we must also pay attention to. They relate more to aspects of the social, economic, and political context in which the expansion of full-school day Kindergarten is taking place in BC. First Call partners have considerable consensus on these principles and issues as well.

First, there is agreement that we need to protect Kindergarten children from an inappropriate academic agenda and a measuring and testing agenda. When young children are playing they are doing what they are supposed to be doing—they're not wasting time!

We also need to build greater mutual respect and appreciation between early childhood educators and school teachers, and between the school system and the early childhood education sector. One aim should be to build a system in which all Kindergarten teachers have training in early childhood development.

And following the principle of “do no harm,” the expansion of Kindergarten shouldn’t divert funds from other parts of an already under-funded public education system.

Given the inadequacy and fragility of the supports for young children and their families in BC, and the crisis in the availability and affordability of childcare, the development of an expanded free entitlement for young children in the school system is most welcome.

However, planning for this expansion needs to address how childcare programs can be sustained during the shift of more five-year-old children into the school system. Family resource programs and other community-based early childhood programs have expressed fears that their funding will be diverted to cover the costs of the increased school entitlement.

This is the type of apprehension that is created in the absence of a comprehensive early years plan from the provincial government and in a policy context where an artificial divide is created between early childhood development and childcare (the responsibility of the Ministry of Children and Family Development) and early learning (the responsibility of the Ministry of Education).

Early childhood educators and families have repeatedly expressed concerns that the government doesn’t understand that for young children, care and learning are not separate. Planning for expanded early years programming requires a recognition that just as school-based programs for young children must incorporate care, quality childcare settings are early learning sites, too.

From the Kindergarten teacher survey data collected by the Human Early Learning Partnership, we know BC has high levels of child developmental vulnerability upon school entry, currently at 29%. We also know that BC has had child poverty levels higher than the national average for the last decade, with the most recent, pre-recession data showing one in five children were poor in 2007. With soaring welfare caseloads and unemployment rates over the last year, we can guess that the child poverty rate has also gone up. Living in poverty is a primary contributor to childhood, and possibly life-long, vulnerability to a variety of ill effects.

Enhanced investments in early childhood education, such as an expanded entitlement to full school-day Kindergarten, are key to bringing down these vulnerability rates over time. Now let’s just pay attention to the details, and make sure we do it right.

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