

FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN BACKGROUND

Ontario's model for Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK), which includes a teacher and designated early childhood educator (DECE), is based on international research and created by experts, educators and partners in the field. With its play-based learning foundation, it has been shown to provide lasting benefits for children's reading, writing, numeracy, self-regulation and social skills. It is an investment in human potential and a long-term vision for children.

Ontario's FDK program is universally accessible and provides an equitable start to school for every early learner in the province. Investment in early learning and healthy child development has been shown to have lasting benefits for educational and economic success as well as social adjustment into adulthood according to Dr. Janette Pelletier of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE).¹ Despite this, the government has signaled it will make changes to Full-Day Kindergarten for the 2020-21 year that could significantly alter the current model. (See 'Current Ontario Situation' below.)

The FDK Model is Working Well

ETFO has long supported play-based learning as essential as it stimulates the brain and allows for the holistic development of all children. Play is how every child learns and makes sense of the world and is instrumental for emotional, social, cognitive and physical growth and well-being.

Charles Pascal, one of the architects of Ontario's FDK, states that the certified teacher and designated early childhood educator team model "has shown major results when it comes to children's social, emotional and cognitive development."²

According to research, Ontario's FDK program has shown lasting benefits for children's self-regulation, reading, writing, and number knowledge to the end of Grade 2, including some benefits for vocabulary. FDK children are significantly more likely to meet provincial expectations for reading in Grade 3.³ A recent study also found that when it comes to children with special needs, early childhood education pre-empts issues from developing or getting more challenging and lowers the intensity of supports required for these children.⁴

Educator Model is Visionary

It is key that in the Ontario FDK model, there are two educators. The teacher and designated early childhood educator each bring specialized knowledge and skills to best nurture the development and growth of every student. They ensure that children's academic and socio-emotional skills are fostered with the support and guidance early learners need.

Kindergarten teachers have knowledge of the elementary curriculum – Kindergarten to grade 8 and child development. They understand how the Kindergarten Program expectations link to later elementary grades. They are responsible for student learning, effective instruction, formative assessment and have ultimate responsibility for evaluation and formal reporting to parents. Designated Early Childhood Educators have knowledge of the learning needs of young children aged birth to five. They study early childhood development, social-emotional skills and bring a focus on age-appropriate program planning to provide opportunities to facilitate experiences for children and contribute to assessment and evaluation of the children's learning.

Early childhood researcher Kerry McCuaig notes that with both educators in the classroom, “they are able to capitalize on children’s individual needs and inquiries. They have the time to know their students very well and to identify problems and intervene early before a child becomes too frustrated and discouraged to try.”⁵

Hundreds of educators and parents have shared their stories on the success of FDK and the teacher-early childhood educator team at ETFO’s BuildingBetterSchools.ca/FDK.

Students

Research shows that FDK students have better work habits, higher levels of active engagement, exhibit more positive and fewer negative behaviours, are more independent and less withdrawn.⁶

FDK is particularly beneficial for children of low socio-economic status and children from diverse language backgrounds. Positive effects are especially pronounced for students using languages other than English at home as there is more time to use and practice oral language.⁷

Economic Benefits

To put Ontario’s experience in perspective, Canada ranks last in early learning spending of all comparable OECD countries.⁸ This makes Ontario’s expenditure in its FDK programs unique and worth preserving.

As TD Bank Group Chief Economist Craig Alexander has said, “Universal public education for children is expensive, but it’s money well spent. It’s going to have a payoff over the entire lifetime of the child. For every dollar spent, the economy gets back between \$1.50 to \$3.00. That return jumps into the double digits for disadvantaged children.”⁹

Current Ontario Situation

FDK Class Size

ETFO supports implementing a Kindergarten class size cap of 26 students. Negotiated class size caps of 30 students in 2017-18, and 29 students in 2018-19 were a first step towards this goal. The government intends to leave hard caps on class size in place for Kindergarten through grade 3; however there continue to be classes with more than 29 students. The lack of adequate space in non-purpose-built Kindergarten classrooms to support the play-based program and manage classroom behaviour are significant challenges. In many cases students have learning or behavioural issues that have yet to be formally identified and supported.

Funding

The Ministry of Education has no plans to change the funded average class size for Kindergarten. The educator to student ratio will also remain the same. For clarification, a Ministry announcement in March 2019 stated that the DECE staffing ratio would change from 1.14 to 1. In the past, DECE replacement (supply) costs were not funded separately from teachers so a 1.14 DECE ratio was used. Going forward, the government intends to have a new and separate funding structure for DECE “supply” costs which would still maintain the current DECE to student ratio.

The Need to Preserve the Current Staffing Model

In its public consultations, the government has signaled possible changes to Full-Day Kindergarten and its staffing model starting in 2020-2021. ETFO's position is that the teacher and designated early childhood educator each bring specialized knowledge and skills to best nurture the development and growth of every student. The team is critical for both the academic and socio-emotional skills of every child and a key foundation of the model.

Summary

For Ontario children, their entry into Full-Day Kindergarten is the start of school with a curriculum that will continue to build through elementary grade levels. The program is demonstrating positive results and lasting benefits for children's reading, writing and number knowledge as well as self-regulation. Creativity, innovative thinking, collaborative problem-solving and self-confidence have also shown growth.

The teacher and DECE each bring specialized knowledge and skills to foster children's academic and socio-emotional skills. They can identify problems and challenges early with each child to nurture their growth, which is particularly important for students with exceptionalities. The team strengthens pathways for students that continue beyond Kindergarten.

The FDK model is universally accessible and is an important investment in Ontario children and their families. As former Assistant Deputy Minister of Early Years Jim Grieve has said, "Ontario's new Full-Day Kindergarten program reflects the intersection of research, international best practice and policy that integrates the needs of families, children, schools and other stakeholders."¹⁰

References

¹ Dr. Janette Pelletier, *Ontario's Full-Day Kindergarten: A Bold Public Policy Initiative*, Public Sector Digest, May 15-June 13, 2013, https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/UserFiles/File/Publications/6-2014_-_Ontario_s_Full-day_Kindergarten_A_Bold_Public_Policy_Initiative.pdf

² Charles E. Pascal, *Full-day Kindergarten – The Best of What We Imagined is Happening*, The Conversation, March 5, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/full-day-kindergarten-the-best-of-what-we-imagined-is-happening-in-classrooms-112602>

^{3,6,7} Janette Patricia Pelletier & James E. Corter, *A Longitudinal Comparison of Learning Outcomes in Full-Day and Half-Day Kindergarten*, The Journal of Educational Research, Jan. 3, 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00220671.2018.1486280#XC6B3EwZSgo.twitter>

⁴ Dr. David Philpott, *New Research Shows Quality Early Childhood Education Reduces Need for Later Special Ed*, The Conversation, March 4, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/new-research-shows-quality-early-childhood-education-reduces-need-for-later-special-ed-112275>

⁵ Kerry McCuaig, *Full-day Kindergarten is What Ontario Needs For a Stable Future*, The Conversation, Feb 10, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/full-day-kindergarten-is-what-ontario-needs-for-a-stable-future-111335>

^{8,9} Kelly Pedro, *Is Full-Day Kindergarten Making the Grade?*, Child Care Canada, April 18, 2018, <https://www.childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/14/04/full-day-kindergarten-making-grade>

¹⁰ Jim Grieve, *Transforming Early Learning Vision Into Action in Ontario, Canada*, International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy", 6(2), 44-54, 2012, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/2288-6729-6-2-44>

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POINTS FOR A LETTER TO THE EDITOR/OP ED

Note: A letter to the editor should be no more than 100-150 words. An Op Ed should be around 400-600 words - check with your local editor.

- For Ontario’s children, their entry into Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK) is the start of school with a curriculum that will continue to build through elementary grade levels.
- Studies have shown that in those countries that provide a better start for their earliest learners, children do better as they progress through grades. They have higher graduation rates and better skills around self-reliance, critical thinking and problem-solving which they need for the workforce.
- Ontario’s education system is highly regarded around the world. One of the reasons is its Full-Day Kindergarten program, which was created by experts and based on research and international best practice.
- Research is demonstrating that FDK is having lasting benefits for students when it comes to reading, writing, number knowledge and self-regulation. Vocabulary and self-regulation are cornerstones of healthy child development and have benefits for students’ later educational and economic success.
- Our early learners, who are in school for the first time, are involved in play-based learning in a very deep way. Play is how children learn.
- The current model of the teacher and designated early childhood educator in the classroom is critical to the success of Ontario’s FDK. Each partner in the team is bringing specialized knowledge and expertise into the classroom to meet the critical learning and socio-emotional skills of children.
- When it comes to children with special needs, studies are confirming that this type of early learning model also pre-empts issues from developing or getting more challenging and provides more opportunities for identifying issues earlier.
- To compromise the teacher-early childhood educator team would completely undermine the optimal learning conditions for students that the program has created over the past nine years.
- Ontario has made a big investment in Full-Day Kindergarten. And parents have come to expect and trust the team of two educators – teacher and DECE – and what they each bring to the Kindergarten classroom.
- There are also many economic benefits of the full-day model. It allows parents, specifically women, to participate more in the workforce and increase their earnings through more work experience and higher post-secondary education qualifications.
- Children are our future. Every student deserves a quality education with optimal learning conditions. Children shouldn’t have to pay for government cuts.

SPEAKING POINTS FOR ETFO MEMBERS ON FULL DAY KINDERGARTEN

Ontario's universally accessible Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK) program is working well. It was created by experts and based on research and international best practice. For Ontario's children, their entry into Full-Day Kindergarten is the start of school with a curriculum that will continue to build through elementary grade levels.

Research demonstrates that FDK is having lasting benefits for students when it comes to reading, writing, number knowledge and self-regulation. Vocabulary and self-regulation are cornerstones of healthy child development and have benefits for students' later educational and economic success.

Play is how children learn. Our early learners, who are in school for the first time, are involved in play-based learning in a very deep way with the support and guidance of an intentional and knowledgeable educator team.

The Teacher-Early Childhood Educator Team

The current model of the teacher and designated early childhood educator (DECE) in the classroom is critical to the success of Ontario's FDK. Each partner in the team is bringing specialized knowledge and expertise into the classroom to meet the critical learning and socio-emotional skills of children.

When it comes to children with special needs, studies confirm that this type of early learning model also pre-empts issues from developing or from getting more challenging and provides more opportunities for identifying issues earlier.

To compromise the teacher-early childhood educator team would completely undermine the optimal learning conditions for students that the program has created over the past nine years.

Investment, not cuts

Ontario has made a big investment in Full-Day Kindergarten. And parents have come to expect and trust the two educators – teacher and DECE – and what they bring to the Kindergarten classroom.

There are also many economic benefits of the full-day model. FDK allows parents, particularly women, to fully participate in the workforce and increase their earnings through more work experience and higher post-secondary education qualifications.

Economists agree that investments in early years education more than pay for themselves through returns to the economy.

Children are our future. Every student deserves a quality education with optimal learning conditions. Children shouldn't have to pay for government cuts.