

A Qualified Teacher is Key to Success in Kindergarten

Response to the Report of the Special Learning Advisor

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ETFO supports the establishment of full-day kindergarten staffed by fully-qualified teachers. Such programs should be available in every publicly-funded elementary school across the province. Polls show that a full-day program with certified teachers is what Ontarians want and support.

The promise: full-day kindergarten

Premier McGuinty's 2007 election promise to establish full-day kindergarten reflects ETFO policy and the research that underscores the importance of greater investment in early childhood education.

The Premier's announcement signalled that Ontario would be taking steps to catch up with other jurisdictions that offer young students full-day programs, staffed by well-qualified, university-trained teachers. Full-day programs would give kindergarten teachers more time to work with their students, teach for deeper understanding of the curriculum, and result in kindergarten students arriving in grade 1 with the literacy, numeracy, and social skills necessary for academic success. The announcement reflected what Ontario parents want for their children's education.

Full-day kindergarten is not new to Ontario: ETFO members are already providing high quality, full-day, every-day programs. During the 2008-09 school year, ETFO members across the province delivered 148 full-day SK programs and an additional 40 full-day combined JK/SK programs. Similar full-day programs staffed by teachers also exist in the Catholic school system.

Within Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia provide compulsory full-day kindergarten for five-year-olds; these programs are staffed by certified teachers. Beginning in September 2010, British Columbia will offer full-day programs staffed by certified teachers and Prince Edward Island will introduce a full-day program that, when fully implemented, will also be staffed by certified teachers. This respect for university-

trained teachers reflects the norm in other developed nations that have well-developed early childhood education programs.

Kindergarten teachers open the door to academic learning for young children. They understand the curriculum, know their students, and are skilled in creating opportunities to best meet their needs. Using a play-based program, kindergarten teachers meet the complex and challenging task of introducing young children to experiential and activity-based learning, adapting the program to the individual student's stage of development, and assessing each student's progress. Kindergarten teachers are trained to understand how the skills and knowledge they are fostering in their classrooms connect to the broader continuum of the elementary curriculum.

Full-day programs, with a certified teacher on site throughout the instructional day, provide an important opportunity for teachers to spend more time with each individual student, monitor and evaluate student progress, and support a continuum of learning. Teachers have received specific pedagogical training on curriculum delivery and integrating activity-based learning into a holistic program. The extended period of time, offered by a full-day kindergarten program, is crucial to ensuring continuity of the kindergarten program and sustainability of what children learn in the classroom. Research tells us that full-day programs are particularly important for disadvantaged children who typically have less access outside of school to resources and activities that stimulate cognitive development.

The Pascal model is not full-day kindergarten

With Our Best Future in Mind, the report presented by Dr. Charles Pascal, the government's early learning advisor, contains a number of positive proposals, but the report's staffing model is highly problematic. The Pascal report recommends a full-day program staffed with two full-time ECE-trained staff and a half-day certified teacher. This is not full-day kindergarten; it is the existing kindergarten programming with added childcare located in schools.

The Pascal model is designed to create full-time positions for ECE-qualified staff who traditionally have had to cope with part-time work or split shifts. The model may improve the working conditions of ECE-qualified staff, but it will create new responsibilities for teachers and impede their ability to monitor student progress and their oversight of program delivery. The model is not the best model for young students. The report trumpets the value of ECE training but fails to fairly recognize the specific education, training, and skills that certified teachers have. ETFO believes there is a better model that provides the best education for students and respects the training and skills that both teachers and ECE-qualified staff bring to the classroom.

Half-day assignment: a barrier to teaching for deeper understanding

ECE-qualified staff cannot replace the pedagogical and curriculum-based skills that teachers bring to the classroom. Proposing a full-day model that restricts the certified teacher to half a day with a kindergarten class seriously limits the opportunity to deepen children's learning of the kindergarten program. Teachers' training and skills are specifically designed to support delivery of the kindergarten program. Restricting the teacher to a half-day with each kindergarten class means limiting the opportunity to ensure each student reaches his or her full potential in terms of reaching literacy and numeracy targets and being socially and emotionally prepared for grade 1. This represents a missed opportunity for student learning that will impact on student success in later years.

ECE-qualified staff can play an important role in supporting the work of the full-time certified teacher. Having ECEs work with the teacher throughout the school day would provide more adult-child contact in the classroom and enhance the positive learning environment.

Half-Day assignment: a barrier to effective assessment

Kindergarten teachers responsible for ongoing observation and assessment of students, are increasingly required by the Ministry of Education and school boards to provide entry-level assessments and to collect data related to students' individual literacy and numeracy skills. If teachers are not with the students for the full day, the application of the skills taught may occur during the other half of the day when they are not there to observe it. This inability to observe throughout the day undermines the ability of teachers to fulfill their assessment responsibilities.

Like all elementary teachers, kindergarten teachers are required to produce formal report cards and maintain regular communications with parents. Full-time kindergarten teachers with two separate classes of 20 students have 40 students; they have 40 formal reports to prepare three times a year and two sets of parents or guardians with whom they have to maintain regular communications. Limiting kindergarten teachers to a half-day would seriously impede their ability to accurately and effectively report on how students in a full-day program are developing.

Half-day assignment: a barrier to program delivery

Under the Pascal model, kindergarten teachers would continue to have the responsibility of working with two different groups of 20 children but they would have the added responsibility of planning and coordinating the work of the staff who are not teachers. Teachers are prepared to take on this responsibility but cannot do so effectively if they are only in the classroom for a half day.

With responsibility for the ongoing assessment and formal reporting for 40 students and the additional responsibility for working with the ECE staff, teachers will become more

classroom supervisors and administrators than educators. Their important contribution to children's learning will be diluted.

Under the Pascal model kindergarten teachers face the prospect of becoming itinerant teachers – “teachers with a cart” -- who have to travel between classrooms and cart their resources back and forth. Teaching from a cart is problematic for any teacher, but, given the number of books, manipulatives, and other resources that kindergarten teachers typically personally provide for their classrooms, travelling between classrooms is particularly problematic. It will undermine teachers' effectiveness and dramatically change the nature of the kindergarten classroom.

Parents expect a qualified teacher in a full-day kindergarten class

A poll conducted by Environics in July 2009 confirms that the vast majority of Ontarians understand the government's plan for full-day kindergarten to mean that students will be in a classroom for a full-day with a qualified teacher, who is either working alone or who has the support of a child care worker for part of the day. The poll also indicated that the vast majority of Ontarians understand the term “full-day learning” for four- and five-year olds to mean these children will be in a kindergarten class with a teacher for a full school day. The poll's strongest message is that 90 percent of Ontarians believe it is important for full-day kindergarten programs to be taught by certified teachers.

Full-day teachers working with ECE-qualified staff

ETFO recommends a full-day kindergarten model in which the certified teacher is assigned to one class of 20 throughout the school day. The best possible program would have teachers working with two full-time ECE-qualified staff -- one working an early shift and the other a later shift to support the kindergarten classroom and provide the extended day program before and after school. Working together, throughout the

school day, certified teachers and ECE-qualified staff can create an optimum learning environment for kindergarten-aged children.

Optional half-day programs

The Pascal report recommends that parents continue to have the option of enrolling their children in kindergarten programs, including permitting children to attend for just a half-day. Past practice indicates that the vast majority of parents will take advantage of voluntary full-day kindergarten programs and, given the reality that most parents are in the workforce, a high rate of enrolment is likely.

It is ETFO policy that senior kindergarten be mandatory for eligible students in the province. Mandatory kindergarten for five-year-olds is currently the policy in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and the Kindergarten Commissioner in Prince Edward Island has recently recommended mandatory, full-day kindergarten for five-year-olds in that province. The *Ontario Kindergarten Program* outlines skills and knowledge that all children should achieve by the end of the senior kindergarten year. Optional half-day or full-day attendance makes achieving these academic and social skills difficult. The Ministry of Education should clearly communicate to parents the importance of enrolling their children in full-day programs.

Early childhood development credentials

The Pascal report criticizes teachers for lacking knowledge of child development but overlooks the fact that teachers have a longstanding track record of being lifelong learners -- attending conferences, workshops, and engaging in extensive professional reading and staff development. This is a direct outcome of their university training. Their professional knowledge is an extremely important aspect of what certified teachers bring to the classroom. Kindergarten teachers typically spend many hours during the year in various forms of staff development.

The Pascal report also ignores the fact that kindergarten teachers often have additional qualifications that they bring to the classroom which enhance their ability to adapt their instruction to the individual needs of the student. Among ETFO members who teach kindergarten, these additional qualifications include primary education, special education, reading, music, English-as-a-second language, and Master of Education degrees. Early childhood development is an integral part of this specialized training.

ETFO encourages professional lifelong learning and offers a wide range of professional learning including workshops, conferences, credit courses, on-line learning, professional learning communities, book clubs, research-based reflective practice, as well as Additional Qualification courses recognized by the Ontario College of Teachers. ETFO's new kindergarten AQ course is accredited by the Ontario College of Teachers and is oversubscribed; now that they have the opportunity, teachers are eager to enrol. ETFO also supports Ontario faculties of education making early childhood development an integral part of the training program for primary teachers.

Program

ETFO concurs with the Pascal report's support for a play-based program for full-day kindergarten. The current Kindergarten Program and the Early Learning Program Curriculum share a holistic approach to child development and an acknowledgment of the importance of play-based learning. Both are designed to fit within the learning framework, Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT), developed by the Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning. However, the Early Learning Curriculum is not designed to replace the Kindergarten Program and it is certified teachers who have the training, skills, and professional knowledge to deliver that curriculum.

Conclusion

ETFO welcomed the 2007 election announcement that the government intended to implement a policy of full-day kindergarten. Implementation is clearly anticipated by parents of young children. The federation supports the Pascal report's overall goal of creating a system of programs and services that offer a continuum for children from birth to age 12. While there are many positive proposals in the report, we cannot and do not support a model that proposes to have certified teachers in the classroom for only a half day. This is not full-day kindergarten and it will not provide the best learning environment for young children and will not make effective use of the important skills and knowledge teachers have. ETFO looks forward to working with the government to develop an implementation plan that is viable and sustainable for kindergarten-aged children and their teachers.