

Kindergarten Is Key in Early Education

By Sam Hammond

Thousands of Ontario children will be stepping into a classroom for the first time this September. They are the four- and five-year-olds starting junior and senior kindergarten.

Traditionally we thought of grade 1 as the start of school; but now we recognize that kindergarten is a critical phase in a child's education. From birth to age eight children's brains are developing rapidly and the learning they experience in these early years sets the foundation for success throughout their school years. Making the most of children's readiness to learn is the single most compelling reason for expanding kindergarten programs in Ontario to a full day.

There are some who think that four- and five-year olds are too young to 'sit in school all day.' What they don't realize is that school has changed and that sitting passively is a thing of the past.

Learning through play

In Sue Varley's kindergarten classroom at Parkhill-West Williams Public School there are no rows of desks and chairs. Children listen to stories on a carpet; they experiment at the water and sand tables; they make up stories in the house centre; they draw and paint; they talk to each other and to their teacher, who guides their learning.

It is at these play centres that children apply the basics of literacy and numeracy that Varley has taught them. It is here that they learn how to deal with their feelings, work with others, and resolve conflicts. Becoming socially competent and feeling good about their own abilities are key to their future academic success. As an experienced kindergarten teacher, Sue Varley guides their learning, observes, assesses, analyses, adapts her program based on those observations, and reports to parents about their progress.

There are hundreds of kindergarten teachers like Sue Varley in Ontario. They not only have university degrees and teaching certificates, but many have taken additional courses or have participated in other professional learning opportunities that help them understand child development. These teachers offer stimulating, play-based learning – programs that children love and that help them grow and learn. These teachers know they could take their students much farther if they were with them for the full day.

Making the most of children's readiness to learn is one reason why European countries, New Zealand and the United States have established full-day kindergarten programs. Prince Edward Island and British Columbia are also considering them. In Ontario today there are several hundred full-day, every day kindergarten programs, each with a certified teacher in the classroom for the full day.

The public approves

The expansion of Ontario's education system to provide full-day kindergarten for all children is long overdue. When Dalton McGuinty promised full-day kindergarten during the 2007 election campaign he recognized that this was an idea whose time has come. Polling shows that the public supports the initiative. Parents of children under eight are particularly keen to have these programs in place. Polls also show a substantial majority of parents and the public think the program should be delivered by a certified teacher.

In a knowledge economy we can't afford not to take advantage of the tremendous potential for learning our children have. It's time for Ontario to move forward.

Sam Hammond is president of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, which represents 73,000 teachers and education workers across the province.