



## Early Learning Program

### Background

The first phase of the new full-day kindergarten program (Early Learning Program) will begin in September 2010 when the program rolls out in about 600 schools across the province affecting approximately 15 per cent of kindergarten-aged children. Full implementation in all schools is slated for 2015-16.

ETFO has been at the forefront of the discussion about the new program and is working to ensure that the implementation details are in the best interests of our members and of kindergarten-aged students.

Legislation to establish the framework for the new full-day kindergarten programs and the extended day programs to be operated by school boards was introduced on February 17, 2010. The bill lacked clarity with respect to establishing teachers' overall responsibility for the program. It was also open to interpretation that principals would have the authority to delegate responsibility for the extended day program to teachers. ETFO participated in the public hearings on the bill and lobbied the government to introduce amendments to the bill. The government responded to our concerns and introduced appropriate amendments. The bill passed as amended on April 27, 2010.

Throughout the implementation process further details will be available through future regulations, Ministry of Education communications, and Ministry-sponsored in-service for school board personnel, principals, teachers, and early childhood educators. The recently-released program document, for example, elaborates on the respective roles of the teacher and ECE.

Some questions and concerns that ETFO members have raised don't have a straightforward response. These will best be addressed as the program unfolds and the teacher and ECEs involved work together as a team, within the context of their collective agreement and contract provisions, to determine what works best. The introduction of the Early Learning Program (ELP) will affect the whole school and some issues arising from the program will involve school administration and other staff.

## THE STAFFING MODEL

**Q: What are the roles of the teacher and the early childhood educator working in the classroom?**

A: Because of the extended day component of the program (before and after school), a teacher will be working with two early childhood educators each day. Both teachers and early childhood educators working in the ELP bring specific knowledge and expertise that will, ideally, be blended to create a nurturing learning environment for students. Both types of educator will work together to plan programs that meet the developmental needs of the students and document their progress and development.

The legislation outlines a shared responsibility for such activities as planning and delivery of the JK/K program, assessment and observation of pupils, and communications with families. However, teachers will have some duties that early childhood educators will not. The legislation, as amended, stipulates that teachers will have overall responsibility for preparing the fall progress reports and formal report cards to parents, instruction, training and evaluation of the progress of kindergarten pupils, management of the kindergarten classes, and preparation of teaching plans.

The teacher will not be in a supervisory role with respect to the early childhood educators working in the same classroom. Instead, both types of educator will be under the supervision of the principal. The provisions of existing teacher collective agreements will also have an impact on some aspects of how the day-to-day work of the Early Learning Program is conducted.

**Q: What will the relationship between the certified teacher and the Early Childhood Educator look like?**

A: The relationship will evolve over time and within the framework of the specific staff roles. Ideally, time will be given for the team members to familiarize themselves with the experience and knowledge that each brings to the team and to help them build a collaborative relationship. Working as a team will be a key focus of the in-service provided to support implementation of the program. ETFO will be supporting its members to the fullest to help foster the goals of meaningful collaboration and teamwork.

The Ministry of Education has been consulting with educational organizations, including ETFO, on material that will delineate the respective roles and areas of common responsibilities. An elaboration of the respective roles is provided in the draft program document posted on the Ministry website.

**Q. Will the introduction of the ELP lead to a reduction in the number of Educational**

## **Assistants (EAs)?**

The full impact of the ELP on the number of EAs is still to be determined, but school boards will continue to assign EAs to support special needs children in the classroom.

### **Q. Could the ELP lead to ECEs replacing teachers in the kindergarten program?**

- A. The ELP is designed to draw upon the skills, training, and expertise of both teachers and ECEs. The Liberal government adopted the ETFO proposal to staff the ELP with a full-time rather than a half-time teacher because it agreed that teachers couldn't fulfill their responsibilities without being there throughout the day.

The Education Act clearly stipulates that only teachers can fulfill the duties of teachers and these duties include providing the kindergarten program, including the ELP.

### **Q. Will the ECEs in the Early Learning Program be ETFO members?**

- A. In most cases, when the ELP begins in September, ECEs assigned to the program will not belong to a union. So they will not be ETFO members.

ETFO has decided to unionize the ECEs assigned to the ELP in both public and Catholic school boards. (OECTA's constitution prevents the organization from unionizing non-teachers.) In its unionization drive, ETFO will be competing with other unions, including CUPE and OSSTF.

## **THE PROGRAM**

### **Q: Is there a new curriculum for this program?**

- A: The curriculum branch of the Ministry of Education has developed a draft curriculum document for use in the new full day programs. A parallel program for the extended day component will be released later this spring. There are some key points to understand:

- The expectations from the *Kindergarten Program 2006* are basically the same expectations that will inform the new document.
- The new document will build on the developmental continuum and the play-based learning focus as outlined in the *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (ELECT) document. This document was developed for the Best Start programs, both school and child care settings. It was written to complement the *Kindergarten Program 2006* and to offer guidance on appropriate programming for young children.
- The curriculum will be reviewed during the 2010-2011 school year and completed by September 2012.
- Schools in the ELP will use this new curriculum. As schools come on stream throughout the five-year phase-in they will be expected to base their program on this new revised curriculum.
- There is no reason why a teacher in a regular kindergarten class couldn't use the new ELP document as a resource.

- The basic premise of the new program is that good programming for young children is based on solid social and emotional development and should be play-based. Although the *Kindergarten Program 2006* refers to play, this aspect has often been neglected or ignored in the pursuit of academic standards. The same expectations are now to be approached in a way that is more appropriate to the developmental needs of young children.

**Q: Will there be a provincial report card for kindergarten?**

- A. The ELP program document will be considered to be in draft form for the 2010-2011 school year. Once the program document is finalized next spring, a provincial Kindergarten report card will be released based on the curriculum document.

**Q: How does the ELP's play-based focus fit with the government's focus on raising literacy and numeracy EQAO test scores in grades 3 and 6? My experience has been that the Grade 1 teacher has expectations regarding the discrete skills my kindergarten students should bring to Grade 1.**

- A. Through the ELP program, the Ministry of Education is respecting what the research says about the most developmentally-appropriate program for kindergarten-aged children. Furthermore, the research on brain development and social and emotional development points to the importance of young children learning to self-regulate so they have control over their attention-span, their ability to focus, and their ability to get along with their peers. Without this self-regulation children will not acquire the learning skills they need to be successful learners in Grade 1 and beyond. An intentional play-based program builds higher level thinking skills in children and allows them to learn according to their developmental stage.

**Q. With the emphasis on a play-based program, will the assessment practices change?**

- A. The ELP program reinforces that assessment in kindergarten should be based on observation and authentic assessment practices.

**Q. Are there increased expectations regarding student outcomes because students in the ELP will be attending full-day?**

- A. The curriculum expectations remain unchanged; the full-day allows for deeper exploration and understanding through the play-based curriculum.

**Q: Isn't a full-day program too long for many children typically enrolled in JK classes?**

A. Children eligible for JK programs are already attending full-day, alternate day and full-day, every-day programs in school boards across the province. (In English public boards alone, there are currently more than 50 full-day, every day JK/SK programs in place.) In addition, thousands of Ontario children are enrolled in full-day child care programs from the age of six weeks and they would include those enrolled in half-time kindergarten programs.

The ELP program is designed to accommodate the needs of young learners and may need to include a scheduled rest time for some or all children enrolled in a particular class. The program is based on the importance of reducing the number of transitions kindergarten-aged children experience during the day.

**Q. Can the Early Learning Program classes be organized so that the JK and SK students are in separate classes?**

A. While school boards have, and will continue to have, the option of separating JK students from the older SK students, Ontario's Kindergarten Program (Revised 2006) was written with combined JK/SK classes in mind. It's the intention of the curriculum to allow kindergarten students two years to reach the stated expectations. Through developmentally-appropriate teaching strategies, teachers should be able to accommodate the range of knowledge, experiences, and skill levels of the children enrolled in the program. The research on child development supports this approach.

The ELP program will be play-based. Therefore, teachers assigned to the program should not be under pressure to ensure their students achieve a discreet set of academic skills by the time they complete their SK program. Through the play-based program, students will develop a deeper understanding of broader literacy and numeracy concepts, among others.

**Q. Will parents of children enrolled in the ELP have the option to send them half-time?**

A. Compulsory school attendance does not begin until Grade 1. A parent with a child enrolled in an ELP class would be able to voluntarily withdraw that child from the classroom at any time.

Some school boards have indicated that parents who prefer part-time enrolment for their kindergarten-aged children should register them at a school that has not been selected for the ELP in Year 1. (This option would not be available in small rural communities.)

It should be noted that where school boards have offered full-day, every-day kindergarten, the vast majority of parents ultimately opt for the full-day because their children tend to want to be with their peers.

**Q: Why will the class size average be 26 students?**

A: Despite its earlier Primary Class Size initiative, for the new program the government has adopted a class size average of 26. The government cites cost reasons and the fact that supervision of the 26 students will be shared by two educators. Full-time teachers in the new program, for example, will have 26 report cards to complete rather than 40 for two half-day regular kindergarten classes.

An average class size of 26 means that, in practice, some classes will be larger than that. Some early projections by individual boards have even included classes as large as 31. ETFO believes that even class sizes of 26 are problematic for both programming and for the physical space required for activity-based learning. ETFO has been lobbying the government on this issue and will continue to do so.

## **PREPARATION AND PLANNING TIME**

**Q: If teachers in the ELP have limited access to their classroom, how will prep time happen? How will teachers get the room ready for the day?**

A. How your prep time is provided will continue to be determined at the school level and will depend on the staffing at your school. Teachers in the ELP will continue to be assigned preparation time according to their respective collective agreements. Whether you'll have access to the classroom during your preparation time is a matter for discussion with your ECE colleagues and the principal. The same applies to how teachers and the ECEs will prepare the classroom for the day. This will be a shared responsibility.

Because the program is new, the details regarding preparation time and classroom set-up are examples of the issues that need to be discussed and addressed at the school level.

**Q. When teachers are out of the classroom during prep time, who will be with the students?**

A. The teacher on preparation will be replaced by another teacher.. Scheduling for the teacher and the ECE will vary depending on the different ways that prep time is provided at the school level. When the teacher is on prep time, the students will be with the ECE and the teacher who is providing prep time. There will always be a teacher in the classroom with the students.

ETFO is developing a sample schedule to demonstrate what a typical day would look like and how teachers' and ECEs' breaks/prep time, lunch, and joint planning time can be scheduled.

## **CLASSROOM RESOURCES**

**Q. Are there guidelines for what the ELP classroom resources should be?**

A. There are no prescribed guidelines, but ETFO has developed a list of recommended resources will be available on the ETFO website.

**Q. The government has announced a capital fund of \$245 million to support the Early Learning Program. Can some of that money be used for furniture and equipment? Can it be used in Year 1 as well as Year 2 of the implementation?**

A. The \$245 million included an equipping allocation based on \$10,000 per class. This allocation can be used to equip kindergarten classrooms in Phase 1 and/or Phase 2 schools. It cannot be used to replace furniture and equipment in existing kindergarten rooms.

Boards can make local decisions regarding how to best use these allocations.

**Q: How will teachers be assured that their personal materials are used appropriately?**

A: The importance of providing appropriate activity-based learning materials is one of the implementation issues being raised by ETFO in our discussions with the Ministry of Education. Although they are not required to do so, teachers nevertheless spend considerable sums of money on materials to support their classrooms. Teachers in the Early Learning Program classes understandably will want to ensure that their personal materials are respected and used appropriately.

Just as certain centres in the Early Learning Programs will be closed for specific reasons during learning centre time, certain centres, such as the book centre, may be closed during the extended day. The teacher who has purchased a vast array of read-aloud books may choose to store them in one area of the classroom that is closed during the extended day program. During this time other books may be available for browsing.

## **EXTENDED DAY PROGRAM**

**Q: If the majority of children in the ELP are enrolled in the extended day programs, what opportunities will the teacher have to communicate with parents?**

A. Parents and guardians dropping children off before school starts and after it finishes is already the reality for schools where children are enrolled in before- and after-school programs. Teachers in the ELP program where children also attend the extended day program will find other opportunities to keep connected with parents.

Teachers will continue to see parents and guardians during parent-teacher interviews,

school curriculum nights, and when parents volunteer in the classroom. In situations where a teacher needs to connect more immediately with a parent, he or she may decide to send a message home with a student or arrange an appropriate time for a telephone conversation. Teachers in the ELP program will also need to discuss the content of communications with parents with the ECEs with whom they work.

**Q. What will happen if the extended day program is considered too costly by parents?**

A. School boards are only required to provide extended day programs if 13 parents request the program. There will be cases where there are insufficient numbers for either or both of the before- and after-school components of the extended day.

**Q. Will the future transitional regulations governing the Early Learning program allow school boards to enter into third party agreements for provision of the extended day programs that will result in these programs being off-site?**

A. Regulations will be forthcoming regarding third party provision of the program. Transition plans that meet specific criteria may be allowed.

However, the ability to expand existing partnerships and the length of the transition period may be limited. Following the passage of Bill 242, the Minister identified a transitional period of two years.

**Q: Will the extended day program be using the same classroom space as the regular day ELP?**

A. The issue of whether a kindergarten classroom will also be used for the ELP extended day program will depend on available space and determined at the school level.

This is an issue that the teachers and early childhood educators assigned to the ELP program will have to discuss with their school administrators. Specifically, the school team needs to identify appropriate school locations for a variety of program activities including the library, the gymnasium, the music room, and the school yard. The ELP, including the extended day, needs to be integrated into the whole school environment.

## **SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS**

**Q: How will the various special needs students be supported in the ELP?**

A. The Ministry of Education acknowledges that this is an important area of concern, especially for children currently enrolled in child care programs, for example, who have access to community-based programs prior to school entry. The Ministry of Education is

working with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to work towards an integration of services offered by both the school board and community agencies.

## **TRAINING**

### **Q. What are the plans for training to support the ELP?**

Various layers of staff development will accompany this roll out. The Assistant Deputy Minister of Education responsible for the ELP met with all six hundred principals of the phase one schools during February and March. Staff development for teachers is taking place in April and May.

The Ministry of Education has also planned summer institutes to provide in-service for teachers and early childhood educators assigned to the new full-day programs. We will work to ensure that these are attended at the discretion of the teachers and not considered compulsory.

There is a Professional Activity Day just prior to Labour Day that may be used for the combined staff members to meet together. As plans are finalized for these days, we will add the information to the ETFO website.

### **Q. Why are Grade 1 teachers being included in the Ministry training sessions for the ELP?**

A. Grade 1 teachers are being invited to the training sessions so that they understand the Ministry's expectations for the ELP and the emphasis on play-based learning.

## **ONGOING COMMUNICATIONS**

### **Q: How and when will ETFO members gain information about the ELP?**

A: ETFO will continue to keep members informed of the details related to the implementation of the new full-day programs through its regular communications vehicles including the *Voice* magazine, the ETFO *e-newsletter*, the website, steward mailings, and ongoing communications with ETFO locals.

JL:IK:VM:CB

Revised May 10, 2010