

How full-day kindergarten makes things worse for kids

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Starting the school year off right is always a big deal for parents, children and teachers.

But it seems the Ontario government went much too far in its efforts to begin the current school year with a burst of happy news.

Recall that on Sept. 3 - the first day of school - the province declared its controversial \$1.5-billion full-day kindergarten program to be a complete success based on results from two academic studies it commissioned.

"In every area (full-day kindergarten) students improved their readiness for Grade 1 and accelerated their development," the news release crowed. Education Minister Liz Sandals added: "These new findings show that we are giving children a stronger start in school and in life."

Yet for all the good news supposedly contained in these reports, written by researchers at Brock, Queen's and McMaster universities, the province didn't produce the actual documents. It simply listed a few bullet points and made a host of sweeping statements. A credulous media did the rest.

The Globe and Mail ran a breathless front page story proclaiming it to be a "landmark study." This despite the fact there was no study to see.

That both reports were completed more than a year ago makes the province's decision to hold back the full goods all the more curious.

Now we know why. Late last week, the Ministry of Education quietly posted the complete reports on its website. Anyone bothering to read them will come away with an entirely different perspective on the effectiveness of full-day kindergarten, particularly when it comes to the program's overall value and its impact on the most vulnerable students in our school system.

The academics compared students attending full-day kindergarten with students attending old-style half-day programs across a variety of social, emotional and educational measures for two years.

For students at schools in low income neighbourhoods and/or showing poor academic results, the research did find evidence that the extra attention provided by a full-day program offered some benefits. This corresponds to previous research that suggests underachieving kids improve over the short-term when given additional support. (Of course there's ample evidence from numerous other sources that these benefits are entirely temporary.)

However, the vast majority of kids in the provincial school system do not face significant problems. And for them, there is no advantage to full-day kindergarten. Across many measures, full-day kindergarten actually delivered poorer results than the old system.

"To be clear, some children appear to have done worse with (full-day kindergarten) than with non-(full-day kindergarten.)" the report states baldly. This includes the areas of emotional maturity, social competence and communication skills.

Putting four- and five-year-olds in school all day doesn't necessarily make every child happier or smarter. The researchers characterized these findings as "mixed results."

Of even greater concern is the fate of the most vulnerable of all students. While kids from poor households may get a short-term boost from full-day kindergarten, the same is not true for children with substantial learning deficiencies.

"Children with special educational needs showed superior outcomes on the measures of social competence and emotional maturity in non-(full-day kindergarten) programs," the report states. In other words, full-day kindergarten fails special needs kids. The authors called for more research into this troubling result.

The effusive Sept. 3 news release from the Ministry of Education was clearly a grotesque misrepresentation of the actual results.

What should we make of all this, beyond the fact you can't trust the Liberal government to tell the truth about full-day kindergarten?

First, we ought to rethink the idea of sending very young kids off to school for a whole day.

This is something parents themselves acknowledge, despite the alleged popularity of full-day kindergarten. **A recent poll by the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada showed 76 per cent of Canadian adults agreed that home is the best place to raise children under the age of six.**

When it comes to special needs kids in particular, parents will always be more attuned to their child's disabilities than a harried teacher responsible for 25 other kids in a noisy and rambunctious environment. And for all other kids, plenty of research shows time spent at home has a significant positive impact on emotional development. Why cut this short?

Second, developing an expensive universal program simply to provide a temporary benefit to a small percentage of students is a colossal waste of money.

Recall that the Drummond Report called full-day kindergarten an unaffordable luxury given the province's fiscal situation. The latest results reinforce this wisdom.

Earlier this month, however, an op-ed in The Record argued universal early learning programs still make financial sense. Former local NDP candidate Cameron Dearlove claimed Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman "found that every dollar invested in early childhood education saves between \$4 and \$17 in future social costs."

This is utterly false. Heckman's work concerns programs aimed only at "severely disadvantaged children."

The economist himself called universal programs such as full-day kindergarten "foolish" back in 2005 because they needlessly provide benefits to well-adjusted, middle-class families.

What's the real story on full-day kindergarten? It's always been a foolish waste of taxpayer money. Now the province's own research shows it's worse than the old half-day program.

Frowny face.

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