



Full-day kindergarten: Put away the pom-poms

Two-year "study" of full-day kindergarten has results too good to be true, literally

ANDREA MROZEK

Executive Director, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada



So many superlatives. Amazing. Life-changing. Cartwheel inducing. That sums up the reaction to a recent full-day kindergarten press release from Ontario's Ministry of Education.

Minister of Education Liz Sandals announced on the first day of school that full-day kindergarten is a massive success story. This is based on a research report that the public is not allowed to see until October.

Clearly, it was a political photo opportunity too good to pass up. Yet, there is another side of the story.

Full-day kindergarten may, and likely will, bring some benefits to some children, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, and particularly in the short-term. The test of time is required to see what the results will really be.

It's time to put away the pom-poms: A best guess is that the research will show some good and some bad outcomes. This is in fact what existing peer-reviewed research on full-day kindergarten already shows.

The full picture

A 2010 meta-analysis of studies conducted by Duke University says that there is a positive association in academic achievement with full-day kindergarten. Long term, however, those improvements disappear. They also mention negative outcomes like increased behaviour problems and a less positive attitude toward school.

In Ontario, from what the public has been permitted to see of the research, there are indeed already notes of concern. For one, the research is based on the EDI, the Early Development Instrument, which is a subjective measure. Teachers will do their best to assess children but rating "cooperation," for example, is more art than science.

So why a song and dance on the first day of school based on an unfinished study?

No one can say for sure, but it's likely that the fine art of politics amidst severe financial pressure is at play.

Selling an expensive service

In 2012, Don Drummond, the economist hired by then Premier McGuinty to assess Ontario's finances advised that full-day kindergarten should be cancelled because it is too expensive.

The costs of full-day kindergarten, which is just the beginning of a bigger early learning plan, run into the billions. The Canadian Taxpayers Federation estimates that Ontario's debt is growing by \$22,342 per minute.

When would a massive expense be absolutely necessary in spite of fiscal constraints?

Enter political hyperbole: When it saves children, that's when.

If school and workforce readiness, delinquency, dropout rates and a host of other education woes can all be fixed before the age of six—now that is a program worth paying for.

And entrenching the program now makes it that much more difficult to remove later on.

It's true that the majority of parents choose to use full-day kindergarten. It's also the only "free" choice on offer. Economics 101 tells us that free stuff attracts people. Charging less than market rates in any domain creates lineups and subsequent shortages. (See Quebec's subsidized daycare program for an example.) The government will then use the shortages as proof positive of program popularity, which is not necessarily the case.

Another pressure the Ministry likely faces is simple demographics. Across the western world, we are having fewer children. To state the obvious, this means fewer children in schools. If the Ministry of Education wants to ensure relevancy in these shifting times, one of the better ways is to expand the programs on offer to younger and younger ages.

Other options

There are other options for families, to be sure. Child tax deductions, cash payments directly to parents so they can choose what to do with the money, reduced taxes for parents: All are options that provide real choice for parents under financial constraints without bloating the bureaucracy.

Schools, teachers and parents are all working together to do their best for kids—here there can be no doubt. But let's save the superlatives for a time when we have some real, peer-reviewed, long-term research in hand. Surely Ontario's parents deserve that degree of honesty.

Originally printed in the Ottawa Citizen September 12, 2013

Andrea Mrozek is Executive Director of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada and author of [The cost of a free lunch: The real costs of the Pascal Early Learning Plan for Ontario](#)

Permission granted to reprint in full with attribution to the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada