

Atkinson Centre

for Society and Child Development

Issues That Matter

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Margaret Wentz contends the Education Minister fudged the numbers in her September announcement on the benefits of full day kindergarten for children. The true story she claims lies in the 'full report' released by Queen's University. ("Ontario's \$1.5-billion kindergarten hoax". Nov 30, Globe and Mail)

Ms. Wentz is referring to two different reports with two different purposes. Both were commissioned by the Ministry as part of the same evaluation. The job of the Queen's researchers was to identify challenges during the 2010 school year; the first year full day kindergarten was made available. Not surprisingly there were bumps. In repeating the challenges Ms. Wentz neglects to mention that the very purpose of the Queen's report was to identify problems so remedies could be developed. She also fails to note the steps the ministry and school boards have since taken to address them.

The Ministry's part of the evaluation was to analyze child outcomes. It used the Early Development Instrument (EDI), a validated tool employed across Canada and internationally to assess children's preparedness for school. Based on the largest sample ever used for this type of study, it found that children who had attended two years of full day kindergarten were better prepared for school. Queen's also looked at EDI results but only for children with one year of full day kindergarten. Its findings were not as promising but the report notes ongoing evaluation is required.

Thus Ms. Wentz's confusion -- one report is looking at inputs; the other at outcomes. The most promising finding is that even with all the challenges identified, children with two full years of early learning showed gains. Imagine the good we can offer Ontario's children when the kinks are ironed out.

Yet there is much more to the FDK plan than children's preparedness for school. FDK is part of a package which includes before and after school, and summer programming for 4 to 12 year olds. These activities have been found effective at closing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children.

The plan also makes schools the preferred location for early learning, care and family support programs for the under 4s. A single location for a range of services is associated with reduced stress for children and families. Parents don't need to coordinate multiple pick-ups and drop offs. Siblings are able to stay together. Parents have time to talk to their children's educators.

All this makes life a little easier for harried parents, which is more than just a nice thing to do. Stress disrupts parents' ability to manage their own conduct, leaving

them with fewer resources to regulate their children's behaviour. The more hassled the parent the less likely they are to engage positively with their children. Chronic parental stress has been connected to poor academic outcomes in children.

Opening up schools to younger children also eases their fears. Familiarity with the school staff, the environment and the routines makes for smoother transition into formal schooling. Younger children in the school environment have also been found to have a positive impact on the social behaviour of older children.

Wente contends that extended day programming is another public cost. Not true. Extended hour before and after school, and summer programming for 4 to 12 year olds is entirely cost recovery. In school districts where the boards of education directly operate these programs (Ottawa and Kitchener/Waterloo) over 5,500 new spaces have been created without a single additional dollar of public funding. Moreover parent fees in school-operated programs have decreased while ECE wages have gone up. This all comes from the efficiencies inherent in having one entity responsible for both education and care.

Finally in throwing around the cost of FDK it is worth considering the benefits. These come from parents who experience fewer work conflicts; children who are happy and confident in school; ECEs who are earning a fair wage and the social cohesion which comes when societies get behind their kids.