

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## All school, for all day, makes Jack an irritable boy

Kindergarten program a blessing for working parents, but burden for some kids who get tired and cranky

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Special to The Globe and Mail Published on Monday, Dec. 14, 2009 12:00AM EST Last updated on Monday, Dec. 14, 2009 3:53AM EST

When the teachers at Toronto's St. Thomas More Catholic School flick the lights on and off to signal the end of playtime, the senior kindergartners put away the toys and sweep up the sand.

Around this time, most kids in the city would be leaving. But these children wash their hands and sit down at their pint-sized tables for lunch. They will stay at school until 3:15, just like the older children.

"I wish I was a big kid," says Sarai, an outgoing, slight girl who likes playing with the kitchen toys. "I wish I was in Grade 3."

As far as scheduling goes, at least, she is.

Welcome to the biggest revolution in Ontario's primary education system since the introduction of French immersion in the 1970s: all-day kindergarten.

Last week, Toronto parents found out which schools and students will be the likely guinea pigs, and the rollout begins next school year with up to 35,000 junior and senior kindergartners. By 2015, all-day kindergarten is supposed to be offered in all the province's schools.

Intended to give young children a head start, all-day kindergarten is also expected to make life easier for working parents. Childcare is expected to be available before and after kindergarten at the same school for a "reasonable" cost.

"It's just going to solve so many challenges that parents currently face," says Jill Worthy, a superintendent with the Toronto District School Board. "Moving into this is really about supporting families. It's not just about academic achievement."

The downside? Little or no naptime. Tired, cranky children are obviously harder to teach, especially when the meltdowns begin. Then there's the boredom factor: these kids may tire of being in the same classroom all day and constantly doing group activities.

"Personally, I think it is too much for a lot of kids," says Caroline Sparling, a parent of two young children who teaches Grade 1 subjects on a part-time basis in Ottawa. "I see a lot of tired kids. I see a lot of kids who aren't super excited to be at school."

Ms. Sparling believes it is important for young children to be able to explore for themselves, even if that means manhandling play dough for an hour on the floor. "You can't accommodate 20 little people's interests in one classroom."

A worn out child is also a problem for parents. Thornhill mother Angela Sarino recently enrolled her son, Nathan, in a full-day junior kindergarten program a few times a week. While she likes the convenience and enhanced learning opportunities, she finds he is very tired by the end of the week. A full week at this age would be too hard on him, she reckons.

"If your child is totally exhausted and needs to just go right to bed, you're not getting any family time in the evening," Ms. Sarino says.

The all-day-kindergarten concept started in so-called high-needs areas with lower-average family incomes. Aiming to prevent children from falling behind early in their academic careers, teachers Pat Rogers and Teresa Tommasone have more time in the all-day setting to work with the kids.

"We avert a lot of children going to special ed because they're getting the help they need here," Ms. Rogers says.

For an all-day junior kindergarten program, Ms. Rogers believes they will need naps and less learning time since some of them will only be three when they enter the program.

"Something we were really adamant about: that it stay play-based," Ms. Rogers says. "This is not Grade 1. Kindergarten children need age-appropriate activities."

Two of Anna Serafico's daughters, Cristina and Jenna, attended the all-day program at St. Thomas More. Now in Grades 4 and 2, respectively, the girls don't have "perfect" grades, but they like school and are confident in class, says the stay-at-home mother.

"It's a wonderful program that's for sure," Ms. Serafico says.

In another school close to downtown, junior and senior kindergartners sit together at tables wearing lab coats.

They are conducting experiments to see whether solids like salt, sand and rice can dissolve in water. Afterwards, they sit down on a carpet as an outside instructor tells them about the things they learned using a girl puppet that makes them laugh.

The school day is soon over, and the kids descend to their regular, spacious classroom on the main floor of Bruce Jr. Public School in Riverdale. Some parents are already waiting to pick up their kids. The other children sit down and pick up a book, and then head over to the little tables by the kitchen for snack time. Bellies full, rowdy after a long day, they head outside for playtime.

Parents love the convenience of having daycare and school in one place. Adene Kuchera, for example, transferred her son Gabriel to the school's daycare when he was two-and-a-half years so he could start all-day kindergarten this fall at the age of four.

"Since he was in daycare all day, it made sense to have a program where it would be the same staff, same kids, everything would be one package for the whole day," says Ms. Kuchera, a housing consultant.

Not all parents are sold on the concept, however, and a ministry of education spokeswoman said they will still have the choice in the future to send their kids for half a day of kindergarten or not at all.

That's good news for parents like Ottawa teacher, Ms. Sparling, who wants her daughter Mia to go to half-day kindergarten next year and spend the afternoons with her.

"I think it's a great thing, just not necessarily great for everybody," she says.