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Full-day kindergarten is no magic bullet

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How is full-day kindergarten working out in Ontario? Great, according to one four-year-old I know. She loves it. The teachers are nice, the games are fun and she can already print her name.

Education Minister Liz Sandals loves it, too. Last month, on the first day of school, she announced the results of a study that [found](#) kids who had attended two years of full-day kindergarten were much better prepared for Grade 1 – and for life success. She called the results “nothing short of incredible.”

The kindergarten juggernaut is rolling across Canada. By next year, Ontario will be offering full-day K to 265,000 kids. Children in Quebec, British Columbia and Prince Edward Island already have it, and Nova Scotia is thinking of offering early education programs beginning at age 2.

Universal early education is widely regarded as a magic bullet that will level the playing field between the haves and have-nots, reduce income inequality, build human capital and ensure that more of our children succeed in the scary new world of the 21st century. Educators, economists and politicians all say so. But what does the evidence say?

That’s a rude question to ask about something that’s so popular. But let’s ask anyway. After all, these programs aren’t cheap – \$1.5-billion a year in Ontario alone. The research cited by Ms. Sandals was a short-term study of 700 kids commissioned by a highly partial government. What else is there?

In the United States, where many cities and states have launched preschool programs in the past decade, a 2010 meta-study by four Duke University authors [found](#) that “attending full-day kindergarten had a positive association with academic achievement (compared to half-day kindergarten) equal to about one quarter standard deviation at the end of the kindergarten year. But the association disappeared by third grade.”

Translation: Kids did better in Grade 1. But their advantage quickly faded.

“Preschool education has become like organic food, a creed in which adherents place faith based on selective consideration of evidence and without weighing costs,” [writes](#) Grover Whitehurst,

an education expert with the nonpartisan Brookings Institution. He has scoured the research. His findings: Some programs work for some children under some conditions. But generic preschool education has been wildly oversold.

Philip DeCicca, a professor in public economics at McMaster University, has also analyzed the data and reached the same conclusions. “You’re not talking about something that can be studied in a rigorous way,” he told me. Generally speaking, the positive effects on the performance of lower-achieving kids are both transient and quite small – like the difference between a C and a C-minus. That’s not much of a bullet. “To me, the question should be, could that money be used in a better way?” he says.

Some Canadian preschool advocates argue that the U.S. experience is irrelevant here, presumably because Canada’s kids, teachers and pedagogical approach are so vastly different (and, it’s implied, superior). But the British experience is also disappointing. According to a 2012 [report](#) by the National Audit Office, Britain’s £2-billion-a-year investment in early childhood education has not improved primary-school performance.

Currently, Ontario advocates a “play-based” system, which emphasizes informal instruction. Some classes are so big that it’s all the teachers can do to keep track of the kids.

But some parents and educators think the kids don’t get to play enough. Do they really need to acquire Grade 1 skills before they reach Grade 1? What if – especially in the case of boys, who mature more slowly – they just aren’t ready? In the U.S., many upper-middle-class parents fight to keep their kids *out* of kindergarten for an extra year so they’ll have an age edge from the start. And in Britain, leading child-development experts have begun a backlash against “schoolification” – the encroachment of the curriculum on childhood at earlier and earlier ages.

Personally, I think there’s nothing wrong with full-day kindergarten (for most kids). But magic bullets are hard to come by. They exist only in the minds of wishful thinkers who believe that smart technocrats administering the right policies can work miracles. Good luck with that.