

Early learning

# Full-day kindergarten offers little academic advantage, study says

[CAROLINE ALPHONSO](#)

EDUCATION REPORTER — The Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Mar. 28 2014, 6:00 AM EDT

Last updated Friday, Mar. 28 2014, 7:38 AM EDT



Senior kindergarten at Epic School in Toronto.  
(Fred Lum/The Globe and Mail)

A new study is raising questions about the value of full-day kindergarten, showing children attending the program in Ontario are no better in reading, writing and number knowledge at the end of Grade 1 than their half-day peers.

Critics have characterized the program as an expensive form of government-subsidized daycare and Alberta and Manitoba have decided against funding the program, basing their decisions on the cost. Newfoundland's budget, released Thursday, pledged to implement universal full-day kindergarten in 2016. The minority Liberal government in Ontario has staked its reputation on the success of the program since it was introduced in the fall of 2010.

The new longitudinal study questions whether social skills learned in full-day kindergarten translate into academic achievement in primary grades.

A team of researchers from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto tracked about 550 children through the early primary grades. By the end of Grade 1, there was no significant difference between children who attended two years of full-day kindergarten and those in the

half-day program when it came to alphabet knowledge, counting and number tasks, and writing a sentence.

Full-day kindergartners did fare significantly better in their vocabulary and their ability to control their behaviour and engage in play-based tasks, important elements when it comes to child development, the study showed.

The findings, which are not yet published, come at a time when the government is facing criticism about overcrowded kindergarten classrooms and the short timeline to roll out the full-day learning program. It has defended the program partly by pointing to a study that it funded showing children enrolled in the first two years of the province's all-day learning program were better prepared for Grade 1 and have stronger language development and better communication and social skills.

Janette Pelletier, a professor at OISE who led the new study, acknowledged that her findings, even though somewhat mixed, wouldn't sit well with those in government who have made full-day kindergarten a signature initiative. But she added that it is naive to expect a new approach to learning to work smoothly during early implementation. Generally, she found that children who attended two years of full-day kindergarten were faring much better than their half-day peers right up until they entered Grade 1.

"I would say the challenge is to improve play-based programs that contribute to lasting change in things like writing and number knowledge. And we want to make sure that learning in Grades 1 and 2 builds on engaging learning in FDK," Prof. Pelletier said.

A similar study out of Manitoba also found that gains from full-day kindergarten did not continue into primary grades.

Ontario's full-day kindergarten program is being rolled out in phases, the last of which is this fall. The government is spending more than \$1.45-billion in capital costs to expand and retrofit schools, on top of millions in operating dollars. B.C. offers full-day senior kindergarten to the tune of \$325-million annually.

Education Minister Liz Sandals said in a statement that she has not had a chance to review Prof. Pelletier's study. Instead, Ms. Sandals made reference to the government-funded study that showed full-day kindergartners are better prepared for school.

Ontario's full-day learning program incorporates two years of a revamped play-based curriculum for junior and senior kindergarten. A teacher and an early childhood educator work in each kindergarten classroom.

Prof. Pelletier and her team are continuing to track the progress of students in Peel, west of Toronto, into Grade 2 and will incorporate the results of the Grade 3 standardized test.

She speculates one reason for not finding a difference in some areas after three years of schooling may be that the primary grades teach children in a more skills-based way that could be unfamiliar to full-day kindergartners. That allows half-day children to catch up.

Mary Louise Vanderlee, an associate professor at Brock University in the faculty of education and an early childhood development expert, said there needs to be changes in the Grade 1 curriculum for children to maintain the gains they have made in full-day kindergarten.

“Right now I do not believe there’s an extensive carry-over of practices from the full-day learning into the Grade 1 program, and I think if there was, then you might see a continuum of advancement from those children who were advanced to begin with, coming into that class,” she said.