

Response to the Consultation Paper Expanding Early Learning in BC for Children Aged 3 - 5

Context

The government has made a commitment to “*assess the feasibility and costs of full day kindergarten for five year olds*” and to “*undertake a study of providing parents with the choice of day long kindergarten for four year olds by 2010, and for three year olds by 2012*”.

The consultation paper references indicators of quality early learning programs and jurisdiction, Canadian and internationally, where early programs are established. However, the basic rationale for the study is not stated: that is, what is the intended goal? BC has a high performing system, with higher achievement results than each of the early learning jurisdictions noted in the paper. There is no reference as to how or why using similar early learning programs would affect BC outcomes.

There is little discussion about the contributions of current ECE programs and any research of their effectiveness. We understand that research is continuing during this consultation period, however in the absence of specific information it is difficult to give informed answers to the consultation questions. We therefore outline in our responses some of the questions we have where data is not currently available.

BC has a high quality primary program that is foundational to the successes of our students. The appreciative lens for study and consultation should be what can we do to strengthen this program? And what are the elements of current ECE programs that contribute to our successes?

Response Questions

1. *What are your thoughts on full school day kindergarten for five year olds?*

The two issues regarding full day kindergarten surround pedagogy and capacity.

Pedagogy: The question is how is a full day program different from half day? There are many examples in BC of full day kindergarten and those models should be researched and reviewed. The review should consider the programming and the basic question of whether five year olds should be in school all day. Eg. Will those who are not developmentally ready to be in full day kindergarten, be disadvantaged when they arrived in grade one?

Capacity:

- Logistics: Who will organize this at the ministry, district, and school levels?
- Funding: Will there be additional funding from the ministry block funding? As it is our advice that lacking such additional funding, other programs/structures would have to be significantly reduced to accommodate full day K?
- Special Needs: Will additional resources be provided for full day support?

- **Teacher Supply:** How many additional qualified kindergarten teachers will be required? If there is currently not an adequate supply, how long will it take to train additional teachers? How will teachers be attracted to remote areas that currently cannot find qualified teachers even for half day K?
- **Facilities:** Some districts have excess space in schools, but it is not configured to accommodate kindergarten needs – will resources be available to renovate, equip and supply such spaces? Some districts, particularly a few large population districts, do not have space available – how will the doubling of kindergarten students be accommodated?

2. What about parent choice for full school day pre-kindergarten programs for four year olds?

The three issues regarding full day pre-kindergarten for four year olds surround pedagogy capacity, and choice.

Pedagogy: The consultation paper references research and practice regarding pedagogy for pre-K programs, though does not define the education training required for the staff responsible for of pre-K. Will ECE (Early Childhood Education) certification be required or adequate for full day pre-kindergarten for four year olds?

Capacity:

- **Logistics:** Who will organize this at the ministry, district, and school levels?
- **Funding:** Will there be additional funding from the ministry block funding? As it is our advice that lacking such additional funding, other programs/structures would have to be significantly reduced to accommodate full day pre-kindergarten for four year olds?
- **Special Needs:** will special needs support be required and funded?
- **Staff Supply:** How many additional qualified pre-kindergarten staff will be required? If there is currently not an adequate supply, how long will it take to train additional staff? How will staff be attracted to remote areas that currently cannot find qualified specialist staff?
- **Facilities:** Facility requirements for preschool (three and four year olds) are different from kindergarten, from the size and availability of toilets to the playground equipment. Will licensing regulations be reviewed and will resources be available for renovations and/or construction, equipment and supplies?
- **Transportation:** This may be of particular concern in the many areas of the province lacking transportation infra-structure for parents and children.

Choice: If full day pre-kindergarten is a parental choice, parents must be fully informed of the rationale and options available to them and to their children. An important element of parental choice will be the availability of wrap-around care, particularly for working parents.

3. What about parent choice for full school day pre-kindergarten programs for three year olds?

The three issues regarding full day pre-kindergarten for three year olds surround pedagogy, capacity, and choice.

Pedagogy: The consultation paper references research and practice regarding pedagogy for pre-K, though does not define the education training required for the teachers of pre-K. Will ECE (Early Childhood Education) certification be required or adequate for full day pre-kindergarten for three year olds?

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4. *What do you think are the most important factors to consider in expanding early learning programs in British Columbia?*

Recommendations

1. At the earliest opportunity, all interested players – government ministries, education partners, post-secondary institutions and the early learning community – should be brought together to share viewpoints and collectively understand differing perspectives. This study is about the ‘early years’ and it matters not where we sit on that spectrum: all need to be aligned and have the ability to ladder through the system. This will require an inclusive conversation that will bridge the need to build confidence through shared commitment, planning and inter-sectoral collaboration. Early and real involvement in the public policy process will improve the chances of acceptance and success.

2. Clearly define the ‘end in mind’ – what do we hope will happen to our kids?

3. Research and define how early learning and care are related if they are no longer to be seen as separate services. How can those currently involved with early learning inform the proposed programs and how can their contribution and commitment be achieved?

4. Ensure that current BC successes, such as preschool programs, StrongStarts and quality primary program, are not lost in the refocus on new early learning initiatives.

5. Recognize that 'accessibility' must mean more than 'choose to attend'. The children who will most benefit from early learning may not be served by simply providing the opportunity.
6. Define what will be the compulsory school age and ensure that all parents are fully informed of their options and the benefits/disadvantages of all choices.
7. Establish pilot programs (eg. StrongStarts) and use the BC action research to determine the BC model of early learning.
8. Define implementation schedules that are phased and based on the needs and capacities of districts, which may vary significantly across the province. Timelines should allow for more extensive consultation, the opportunity to determine recommended program options, and time for differing systems to build capacity.
9. Funding (to districts and schools) and cost-sharing (with parents) must be clearly articulated before decision to implement early learning programs.
10. Investment in leadership capacity will be required at all levels - ministry, district, and school – to ensure success.