



Study favours full-day classes for 4 and 5 year olds

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A new study says that Ontario's decision to extend kindergarten from half- to full-school days will provide a boost to the provincial economy as well as the education system.

A study released Monday by the Centre for Spatial Economics says funding full-day schooling for four- and five-year-olds, when coupled with extended child-care options, provides a greater economic benefit than any other government spending.

The study, commissioned by the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development at the University of Toronto, says every \$1 million spent on early learning and childcare creates 29.3 jobs – a third more than created by \$1 million spent on roads and infrastructure.

Every \$1 million spent on building or renovating classrooms creates 20.1 jobs, according to the study.

It also found that every \$1 invested in early learning would generate \$2.42 in benefits for the province through increased earnings, improved health and reduced social costs.

The study estimated that every dollar invested in early learning and child care increases the provincial GDP by \$2.02.

In estimating the short- and long-term returns of the program, the authors looked at economic gains from associated education and construction jobs, increased freedom for parents to hold jobs and pursue further training, and reduced school drop-out rates.

But the authors of the report warned these benefits will be much less if before- and after-school programs are not offered as well as full-day kindergarten and junior kindergarten.

Ontario's early-learning adviser, Charles Pascal, recommended such programs but the provincial government opted to leave it up to individual school boards whether or not to offer extended-day programs that will be paid for by parents.

As a result, few schools in Ontario will be offering extended-day programs when the first phase of full-day kindergarten begins next month for 35,000 children in about 600 schools.

Robert Fairholm, a partner at the Centre for Spatial Economics and one of the authors of the report, said the extended-day and year-round childcare are needed because children benefit from fewer transitions during the school day, and because the program would make parents' working schedules easier.

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty has said he is committed to the full program recommended by Pascal, but focused on the school-day portion of the initiative first because of the province's faltering economy.

Pascal called for an integrated system of early learning for children from conception to age 12 and recommended spending up to \$1 billion a year on extending kindergarten to a full day for the province's 250,000 4- and 5-year-olds and another \$1.7 billion to upgrade classrooms.

McGuinty however committed only \$500 million over the next two years, with the expectation that all schools would offer full-day kindergarten by 2015.

School boards say they aren't offering the before- and after-school option because fees of up to \$30 a day have made parents reluctant to sign up.

The report looked at earlier studies of the impact of child care on parents' ability to work and on the social, educational and health benefits for children in high quality child care programs.

It is not clear if the lack of extended-day, full-year programs this year is just growing pains or a sign the McGuinty government has switched course in the face of tough economic times, the report says.

If the latter is true, then the government is turning its back on "probably one of the most effective economic stimulus programs it could implement," Fairholm said.