



THE NEW KINDERGARTEN

Full-day kindergarten, complete with both teachers and ECEs, may be coming to a school near you. *Tim Johnson* discovers what these classrooms will look like and how this new structure will make your child smarter

THE JUNIOR kindergarten room at Bruce Junior Public School in Toronto's east end doesn't look much different from most in Canada. Over here, three kids sit on a rug and stack blocks while over there, five more colour at a table, and next to them, three little girls sit quietly listening to a teacher reading a story. Behind that placid scene, one little boy has occupied himself with the business of whipping a giant orange stuffed snake against the wall. It's a busy place. But while the scene may be familiar, the script is not—it's the things that you *don't* see that make this room an object of conversation amongst politicians, parents

and pundits across Ontario—and child care experts around the world.

The full-day program for four- and five-year-olds at The Bruce WoodGreen Early Learning Centre in Bruce Junior School is offered through a partnership with WoodGreen Community Services, the City of Toronto, Toronto District School Board, Atkinson Foundation and several community agencies. Here, children attend a seamless, full-day kindergarten program—early morning childcare (beginning at 7:30 a.m.) blends fluidly into morning class, lunch is taken in the classroom, and then afternoon class blends right into after-school care (until 6 p.m.), all in the same place. Parents have a menu of

options to choose from, from simple half-day kindergarten to an extended-day program. This year's program, which has 40 children enrolled, is guided by a team of three educators—one certified teacher and two early childhood educators (ECEs)—who work together in the classroom, something made possible by several separate collective bargaining agreements. These educators keep individual profiles on each child, and meet weekly to discuss how they can enhance students' progress. Monthly meetings are held with teachers from the other primary grades to discuss any academic or social problems that Grade 1, 2, and 3 teachers are seeing in their classrooms, so that these issues can

be identified, analyzed and then addressed at an early stage. Truly revolutionary is the cooperation between the teacher and the ECEs at WoodGreen, the latter of which are not treated as assistants but as equals, and valued as highly trained experts in childhood development. "We're a team, and we plan together, teach together, meet with parents, write report cards, and do professional development together," notes Lori Gray, the early years coordinator at Bruce WoodGreen.

The program has a lot of fans—and some of the biggest are parents. "We love it," enthuses Eamonn Nolan, whose son, Tarabh, 6, attended both junior kindergarten and senior kindergarten in the program and whose daughter, Ceili, 4, currently attends junior kindergarten there. "It's exactly what we were looking for—quality day care for our kids—and the fact that it blends into the classroom is awesome for us." Nolan, a high school teacher, has been especially impressed by the work of the ECEs. "They have so much experience with children at the preschool-age level; they're real experts. And having that expert in the room is a lot different from just having a teacher whose expertise is curriculum implementation. They provide a lot more earthy communication with you," observes Nolan, noting that Ontario kindergarten teachers have only completed their primary/junior training in teacher's college, something that doesn't mandate any kindergarten or early years experience. "Having those ECE qualifications indicates that this individual has a lot of hands-on experience with this age group."

Child care practitioners and experts from around the world have visited, then gone home to implement similar programs. And now the rest of Ontario will benefit from Bruce WoodGreen's experience. The program has served as a pilot and prototype for the full-day kindergarten program that the Ontario government will begin rolling out this fall. The program will be implemented in stages, with up to 35,000 students enrolling in September 2010. The province has selected the first wave of schools based on criteria including available space, need, and the impact upon existing local child care. When it is fully phased in—something that won't happen until 2015—Ontario will become the only province or state in North America providing a seamless full-day, extended-day program for all four- and five-year-olds (although other

provinces have been moving in this direction, including New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec and British Columbia). Significantly, the model Ontario will be using—a seamless day—will be unique, breaking new ground in the care and education of young children in Canada.

Experts have long understood the importance of the early years for a child's development and learning, especially the period

environment, they will do better."

Indeed, studies have shown that high quality early learning programs give kids a better start in almost every facet of their lives—in terms of school preparedness, success in school, likelihood of graduation and post-secondary studies, social adjustment, health, longevity, and engagement in society. But Dr. Lee warns that the program must be well-designed and based on solid

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between birth and five years. And this has only been driven home by recent studies. "The research to date has told us one very important thing about education—the earlier, the better," observes Dr. Kang Lee, director of the Institute of Child Study at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto (UT). And while the literature is vast, Dr. Lee points out a few of the most salient—and startling—points. Remarkably, researchers have found that they can predict, with up to 70 percent accuracy, a child's academic success in Grade 3 by measuring the size of vocabulary at age four. "And if a child doesn't have enough vocabulary, the child will always find himself behind, throughout his school years," says Dr. Lee. Kids should know between 3,000 and 3,500 root words by around age five. Lee also notes that the ability to focus and properly shift attention has a strong impact on a child's cognitive ability, and that proper training in this area can actually increase a child's IQ. Music is another potential IQ booster, as it's believed to enhance a child's attention span. And in math, kids from the age of three have a strong sense of numbers and amounts, a skill that needs to be properly developed.

Dr. Lee notes that parents, teachers and ECEs all have a role to play in imparting and developing these important skills, and that a good early learning program can be a big part of the equation. "We know that if these very young children can get off to a good start in terms of learning language and learning numeracy skills, then they're going to do better later on, because literacy and numeracy are those fundamental building blocks," notes Kathleen Wynne, Ontario's minister of education. "If we can get all of those children into an enriched learning

educational research. "It's very tempting for some parents and teachers to think, 'Well, we've got a full day now, let's just bring down the Grade 1 curriculum to kindergarten,' and ask them to sit there and teach them one plus one equals two and about how to write words, just like they would in Grade 1," says Dr. Lee. "That would be the wrong approach."

In fact, many experts agree that, in this shift, the ministry and school boards must remain vigilant against what is known as "schoolification," a term that describes the takeover of early childhood education by school—and the grading, desks, memorization and other elements that come with it. Dr. Lee observes that the research has shown that play-based learning is the most effective for very young kids, and this should be the basis for the early learning program. Interestingly, he points out that supposed "tried and true" standbys for imparting literacy—letter magnets on the fridge, picture books with words along the bottom—actually do nothing to help teach reading. Rather, at home and in the classroom, literacy and numeracy should be imparted through play and games that involve words and numbers. Even a basic understanding of algebra and fractions—concepts that are usually taught much further down the line—can be taught to kids as young as five through play. "Kids learn through manipulating objects, things they like such as blocks. You don't give them equations, you don't give them notations, instead you give them ideas about what is a half, what is a third, and things like that."

A maintained commitment to quality play-based learning was a key recommendation in a report penned by Dr. Charles Pascal, who was appointed by Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty to advise him ▶

on the best way to implement early learning for four- and five-year-olds. While the province has not instituted all of his recommendations, the report, entitled *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*, serves as the base and foundation for the education ministry's plans for the full-day program. Wynne insists that schoolification will not take place and that play-based learning will remain a priority.

Dr. Pascal also recommended that the new Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT) curriculum serve as the basis for the curriculum used in the full-day program. ELECT was piloted at Bruce WoodGreen, too, and is an emergent curriculum, meaning that rather than strait-jacketing teaching with hard and fast themes and timelines, learning instead flows out of the children, their stated interests, the observations of teachers, and even daily events. "It could be the dead of winter and the teacher finds a spider inside and the kids are fascinated by it, so that's when you teach about insects. In a more typical program a teacher might wait until spring-time for that, even though the kids are interested in something completely different by then," says Caitlin Paterson, an early childhood educator (ECE) and assistant supervisor of the program at Bruce WoodGreen, noting that basing curriculum on children's interests leads to greater progress and academic success. Wynne explains that the full-day curriculum—still a work in progress—will be a mixture of old and new. "We will be taking the best from the ELECT curriculum and from the current kindergarten curriculum...and blending them together to come up with a very good curriculum," says Wynne.

The full-day program will also feature both a certified teacher and an ECE working side by side for the duration of the day. The idea is that they each bring a set of skills to the table; ECEs bring a well-developed knowledge of children's cognitive development and social, emotional and behavioural needs, while teachers bring the expertise necessary to prepare lesson plans and properly deliver the provincial curriculum. Wynne feels that having an ECE in the room will help provide a bulwark against schoolification. "I think that the best protection against that notion of schoolification is the presence of the early childhood education philosophy," observes Wynne. "A lot of that is already in our kindergarten classrooms, but I think that the addition of the early childhood educator's skills will

really consolidate that."

Moreover, and perhaps most significantly, having both an ECE and a kindergarten teacher in the classroom throughout the day contributes to the seamlessness of the program, a key element. Dr. Carl Corter notes that having these two educators working together, in tandem, is much better than having one teach for part of the day, then hand the baton to the other. "Having studied the literature and observed an integrated approach in operation for a number of years, it's clear that a relay-race approach doesn't make sense," says Dr. Corter, chair of the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development at OISE/UT. "The best thing for the kids is a coherent day, where people are working together as a team so they're not adding transitions unnecessarily within this program."

Basing curriculum on children's interests leads to greater progress and academic success

And for parents who have struggled to cobble together their own combination of daycare and school, "transition" is a very familiar word—as is the word "hassle."

Christine Park knows all about it. Her early care situation for her son, Evan, 6, is better than most—her child care centre and school are both located in the same building in Toronto's west end. However, the two operate as separate entities. Evan spends time in different rooms, marching through a schedule of day care and half-day kindergarten. "It's very confusing and frustrating at times," she says. And by the time she picks Evan up, the kindergarten teacher—whom she rarely sees, due to the daycare/school/daycare routine familiar to many parents—has either gone home or moved onto extracurricular activities. "As a parent working outside the home, I can probably speak for many: you drop your child off at daycare and you pick your child up at daycare, and you have next to no communication with your child's kindergarten teacher. They spend half a day with your child, and you know nothing that goes on."

Although Evan is now too old to benefit from it, Park believes that, for other parents with kids entering kindergarten, hav-

ing their children in a single program throughout the day, and having contact with the educators, will be a huge advantage "To be able to hear about your child's entire day—especially because four-year-olds are not always the best at communicating—that seems very exciting. I think parents will love that aspect," she says.

Dr. Janette Pelletier, a former kindergarten teacher and school psychologist and now a professor of human development and applied psychology at OISE/UT, adds that her research has shown that full, seamless day programs indeed lead to fewer disruptions for children and parents. Follow-up research performed by a graduate student at OISE found that parents' daily hassles were significantly reduced when they could just take their child to one place for the whole day. "It makes sense, when you think about it." In addition, Kerry McCuaig, expert advisor to the Ontario Special Advisor on Early Learning, Dr. Pascal, notes that researchers compared parental satisfaction at Bruce WoodGreen to that of nearby schools and found that, not only was general satisfaction higher, but parents at WoodGreen felt a greater responsibility to remain in touch with their child's teacher. They also felt better equipped to help their child learn, and these parents also tended to remain more involved in their child's school activities in later years. And, importantly, the elimination of disjunction, transitions, of bundling up and moving, is also better for learning. Hassle can lead to stressful situations for families, and research has shown that family stress is bad for a child's learning.

However, despite these advantages, the new Ontario plan is not without problems. Much of the criticism levied by those opposed to the program has focused on its hefty price tag: once fully implemented, the program will cost \$1.5 billion per year—a significant sum for a province that's already dealing with a record \$25 billion deficit—and critics feel that the actual cost could end up being much higher. However, critics don't talk about how much the program will save families. While child care costs vary depending on where you live, the plan could save parents almost \$500 per child per month in a smaller town, and up to \$700 or more in more expensive cities like Toronto. And in these times of recession, one study, performed by the nonprofit Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, has found that child care funding is an effective form of stimulus—every dol-

lar invested in child care, they found, increases GDP output by \$2.30.

Other concerns involve pay for ECEs, who will almost certainly be paid a lot less than their certified teacher partners, and whether a true team-teaching approach (which has been shown to be much more effective than a hierarchical one, where the ECE serves as assistant to the teacher) will be possible given these unequal terms. "If I took a position in the full-day learning program next year in one of the new schools, I would have to take a pay cut," notes Paterson, the ECE at Bruce WoodGreen.

The new program also falls short in other ways, in the eyes of some experts. While Bruce WoodGreen works cooperatively and pools resources between the Toronto District School Board and a social-service nonprofit, the province's plan will streamline everything under the purview of the school board alone. And, unlike its pilot program, the province's plan does not make provisions for times when school is out—winter holidays, March break and summer—creating a potential child care crunch during those times.

And while school remains optional for kids under the age of six—meaning that parents can partake of as much or as little of the program as they want—much of the concern expressed by parents centres around the unknowns. This is new territory, and it remains unclear how the first schools down the chute will adjust. "Other schools haven't had eight years at it, like Bruce WoodGreen, to work out the bumps. And the province seems to be moving quite quickly," observes Christine Park.

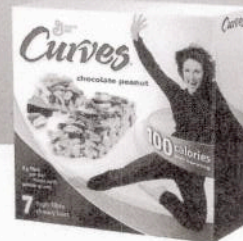
This uncertainty led Bruce WoodGreen to actually decline the province's offer to make the school a part of the first phase of schools to institute a new early learning program. Gray, early years coordinator, explains that the new plan deviates from their example in a number of ways, and they will wait and see what the program looks like once it's in place in other schools.

And it is likely that the early learning program will actually look different from board to board, as much of the decision-making has been left to local trustees and administrators. For example, the ministry of education will not guarantee that the care will all take place in one room, that there will be continuity in the teaching team (i.e., that the same teacher and ECE will always work in tandem) or that this will be a team of equals (although Wynne insists that this is the goal). In addition, it's still too

early to know whether or not there will be wait lists, and details are still being worked out on how this will work for specialty programs (like French Immersion or alternative schools). And while the school-day portion of the program (generally from nine in the morning to three or four in the afternoon) will be fully funded, the before- and after-school portions will remain a fee-paid system. But there will be no seven-dollar-a-day plan like the one in Quebec—the ministry of education has stated only that parents will be charged a "reasonable fee."

And the government is urging parents not to lose the forest for the trees—reminding them that, after all, this move is a very big step, something unique throughout Canada and North America. Wynne points out that the staggered roll-out will serve to help iron out the bugs—each stage will hold lessons for the next one. The ultimate goal is to give parents options in care, and that the care provided will be nurturing, stress-reducing and high quality. Will that be the case? The first wave of 35,000 four- and five-year-olds will find out this fall. CF

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