

# Full-Day Kindergarten Builds a Solid Foundation for Every Student



The discussion about quality ECEC leads us to the Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten Program. Although it has faced complaints and criticism from a number of opponents, this ground-breaking initiative has now been almost completely implemented. And, for the most part, parents, teachers, ECEs, and administrators agree the program is preparing children socially and academically, leading to better outcomes in later years (Alphonso, 2017; Janmohamed, et al. 2014). However, to deliver the program most effectively, it must be designed, funded, and operated appropriately. Although the government has introduced class size caps that restrict FDK classes to no more than 30 students, there remain some critical issues that need to be addressed.

## Ensuring the Continued Success of Full-Day Kindergarten

Kindergarten-Grade 1 combined classrooms have been a concern for several years (Hammer, 2011). In the 2017-18 school year, Ministry of Education data reveal 148 combined Kindergarten-Grade 1 classes in Ontario Catholic elementary schools, alone. This is troubling because a split classroom could have students ranging from four to seven years old, with large gaps in social and cognitive development. Also, there is a marked difference in the curriculum between Kindergarten and Grade 1. Play-based learning is a fundamental principle of the full-day Kindergarten program, while the Grade 1 curriculum is more structured. Split classes limit the time and space available for Kindergarten students to play and explore (Alphonso, 2014a).

In spite of having a teacher and an ECE in the classroom, and even with Ministry directives to cap class sizes, some full-day Kindergarten classes continue to maintain student numbers that are difficult to manage. Ministry of Education documents show that for Catholic elementary schools in the 2017-18 school year, some 249 FDK classes, representing 9 per cent, have 30 or more students. The academic research is very clear that small class sizes are an important determinant of student outcomes, especially for disadvantaged children and others who might have difficulty transitioning to the school setting (Schanzenbach, 2014). Also, when dealing with young children in a play-based environment, reasonable class sizes are essential for ensuring the safety of students and teachers. We cannot allow overcrowding to jeopardize the success of the ambitious full-day Kindergarten program.

Even when class sizes are kept relatively small, the interaction and combined efforts of the teacher and ECE are vital to student success. When the program was developed, the teacher/ECE teams were recommended based on pilot tests in Ontario and elsewhere, in which

teams were found to “add to the strengths of the professional preparation and skill sets of both teachers and ECEs” (Pascal, 2009). ECEs bring specialized knowledge about early childhood development, while certified teachers bring high levels of skills and training related to pedagogy and delivery of the curriculum. Research has shown one of the main reasons students are benefitting from the program is that staff teams are “uniting around the mission to support young children and families” (Pelletier, 2014). The proper functioning of the staff teams is upset when school boards manipulate government regulations or staff schedules so that one of the members of the team is taken out of the classroom during the instructional period. We must keep the program true to its original promise and guarantee that the government and school boards will create the conditions for teachers and ECEs to

provide the best possible learning environment for every student in every class.

