

Full-day kindergarten works, and should be extended across the country: Editorial

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A new study shows two-year, full-time kindergarten pays off for both kids and society. (Dreamstime / TNS)

By Star Editorial Board

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Back in 2010 Ontario's Liberal government began a bold experiment. It launched a plan to bring in full-day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds over the next five years.

At the time, the \$1.5-billion plan was dismissed by then-Progressive Conservative leader Tim Hudak as a "frill" or "shiny new car" that Ontarians could not afford.

Now the results of a new study by researchers at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) provide strong evidence that the experiment is paying off in spades.

The research, which tracked almost 600 children, should point the way for other provinces and territories to follow Ontario's lead, for academic, social and economic reasons.

Of course, that will take some political investment. Currently only six provinces and the Northwest Territories offer

full-day kindergarten for five-year-olds. The others have only half-day kindergarten. And only Ontario provides it for four-year-olds, though the Northwest Territories and Nova Scotia have plans to introduce it.

Still, the OISE study shows that the benefits of two-year, full-day kindergarten are well-worth the initial investment. Here's why:

First, it found children in the two-year, full-day learning program scored higher on reading, writing and number knowledge than those in a half-day program, and remained ahead until the end of Grade 2.

Second, the children also scored higher on self-regulation. That means they are better prepared to respond "to life's stresses and return to a calm and alert state," one of the researchers, Janette Pelletier, writes in an [article](#) on the research. This is an especially important skill for children, she says. "Existing research shows that self-control, an aspect of self-regulation, predicts long-term health, wealth and even a reduction in crime."

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The pay-off, then, isn't just for kids, but for society as a whole.

The researchers also found that, as the government had predicted, parents in particular benefit from the two-year program. That's because the schools that provided integrated seamless care and education from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. reduced the hassles for working parents trying to piece together child care and kindergarten.

Full-day kindergarten saves families money, as well. That is particularly important in Toronto, where the cost of child care is the highest in the country. Indeed, a 2015 study found that average families with two children in this city pay a staggering 48 per cent of after-tax income on child care.

The two-year, full-time kindergarten program also opened up, as the government had argued, scarce licensed child care spaces for other families as four-year-olds went off to school.

That is exceptionally important when considering that 75 per cent of mothers of young children are in the workforce, but licensed daycare spots exist for just 22 per cent of children under five. It's even tougher for parents trying to get their child into a subsidized daycare spot. In Toronto alone there were almost 12,000 eligible children in the queue in 2016.

Full-time kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds, then, benefits parents of younger kids, too.

Opening up child care spaces is also helpful as the federal government begins to invest in a national child care program. So far the Trudeau government has budgeted only \$7 billion over the next 10 years. That's hardly enough. But if every province introduced two-year, full-day kindergarten, it would help Canada reach its goal of universal

early childhood education that much sooner.

Finally, full-day kindergarten pays for itself, and more. A study from the Centre for Spatial Economics found that over the medium- and long-term, every dollar invested in the program will generate \$2.42 for the province in reduced social costs and improved health outcomes.

When he introduced the program, then-premier Dalton McGuinty called it part of a “virtuous circle”: quality education is necessary for a strong economy, which in turn provides government with the revenues needed to support spending on education.

He was right. Full-day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds is turning out to be a success for kids, society and government. Now the rest of Canada should follow.

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