

# All-day Kindergarten delayed; all-day

## A look back and a look forward at the politics of early childhood education in BC

By Noel Nerron

Twenty years ago this fall, the Vancouver school board launched its first all-day Kindergarten program as part of its public school system.

Now, two decades later it appears the provincial government is about to play catch-up with the setting up of a provincial Early Childhood Learning Agency to report back this fall after a rushed and inadequate "consultation" process.

Sadly, the VSB's innovative and near system-wide launch was rudely spiked with the province subsequently providing, in a regressive and discriminatory move, provincial funding only for all-day Kindergarten for children who were learning English as a second language, were Aboriginal, or had certain special needs.

Since that time these restrictive entrance requirements for all-day Kindergarten have resulted in thousands of "other" children across the province being unfairly denied access to valuable early childhood learning opportunities.

The growing body of early childhood research and practice has demonstrated that developmentally appropriate programs—both all-day junior Kindergarten for four-year-olds and senior Kindergarten for five-year olds—provide the social, emotional, and cognitive support for all preschoolers. They also help narrow the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children giving all of them a better chance for success.

BC's failure to date to address the lack of readiness for school—one in four Kindergarten preschoolers, or about 11,000 annually entering Kindergarten—as noted in the provincial 2007 provincial speech from the Throne, highlights our failure to invest in a meaningful way in early childhood education.

In other words, this was the genuine strong start to which these kids were entitled—not the current, misnamed,

provincial "Strong Start" centres across the province, which are really casual, drop-in, centers designed, according to some critics, to provide political cover for Victoria's inaction leading up to an election.

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Experienced Kindergarten teachers will tell you that preschoolers, lacking basic preliteracy skills, increasingly fall behind their peers with many requiring added, sustained, and often more expensive assistance later on when early intervention would have levelled the playing field.

We can now expect a hurried announcement this fall that all-day Kindergarten for all five-year-olds may be made available in 2010 or 2011.

But early childhood procrastination is more likely to occur as the provincial government continues to focus on high profile items such as roads, bridges, convention centres that grab the headlines, while the real, long-term, building blocks of our society—our preschoolers—continue to be sidelined.

A glance at the current vast wasteland of what passes for publicly funded preschool education in this province is dispiriting. Indeed, it points to how out of touch with contemporary lives of very young children and their families Victoria has been for the past decade.

It is significant that the official background paper posted on its website of the province's Early Childhood Learning Agency quietly ignores childcare.

This is not surprising since the Liberals cancelled the proposed universal childcare program when they came to power in 2001 leading to the present worsening daycare situation.

They also reneged on an election promise to implement part of this plan—the nascent \$7-a-day universal out-of-school program.

It is clear that the current crisis in

childcare—for example, there are 1,400 children on a waiting list in one Vancouver neighbourhood alone—is not on the agenda of the Early Childhood Learning Agency review.

The fact that the BC Liberals seem to view childcare as a commodity, something that parents need to purchase, has up to now permeated this debate.

The ideological blinkers worn by the Liberals seem to prevent them from being sensitive to the dramatically increased economic pressures placed on young families. Two-parent single-income families have not been the norm in this province for over two decades.

In regard to childcare, Jody Dallaire, the chair of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, pointedly notes that childcare "should be viewed as a public good that requires sound public policy development and investment of funds."

BC Liberals also continue to ignore the economic benefits of solid early intervention programs in the lives of at-risk kids, pointing instead to the costs of such programs.

At least one study points to the fact that for every dollar spent on quality preschool programs for vulnerable kids, \$12.90 ultimately returns to the public purse. And the Early Childhood Learning Agency notes that "the economic benefits of quality programming in the early years have also been studied, showing significant savings in social programs when children participate in them."

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Three years ago, the BC government agreed with other provinces that the four guiding principles of any childcare program must be quality, universally inclusive, accessible and developmental. Nevertheless, the gap between agreement and implementation in this province is as wide as the Grand Canyon.

So don't hold your breath for an extensive integrated childcare support network for working parents and their families in the upcoming recommendations from the Early Childhood

Learning Agency.

With BC having the highest child poverty rates of any province in Canada—one in four children now live in poverty—it will be interesting to see how many junior Kindergartens for four-year-olds reach the more than half of BC's 60 school districts with a critical mass of poor preschoolers in their care. Rural poverty, often hidden, matches in intensity that of urban centers.

Currently there are only four junior Kindergartens providing head-start programs for disadvantaged four-year-olds in the entire province, and these are not recognized for funding purposes by Victoria.

And in the past, the provincial government flatly refused to recognize child poverty as a distinct eligibility category when it determined its current restrictive entrance requirements to all-day Kindergarten for five-year-olds. (The abolition of the Equity Branch within the Ministry of Education and the 2003 attempt to slash inner-city funding underlined this backward move).

By contrast, the enormously successful Head Start program, begun in 1965 to address systemic poverty in the United States, has benefited over 20 million at-risk kids.

What has been offered to date as early childhood initiatives by the BC Liberals?

Sadly, these can be characterized as mostly superficial programs or early childhood gimmickry such as: showy items of one-time-only grants to various organizations, one-time-only book handouts to parents of preschoolers and glossy brochure-driven initiatives with catchy titles such as "Ready Set Learn" and "Welcome to Kindergarten."

Linda Reid's (minister of state for early childhood) partisan boondoggle distribution of booster seats for young children and Shirley Bond's (minister of education) garnering of a disproportionate amount of playground grants for her own riding, do not inspire much confidence in equitable public policy development.

While Bond's recent acknowledgement in a *Georgia Straight* interview, that early childhood education should incorporate a continuum of care, play, and education and this could be

viewed as encouraging her outlandish claim that "we've clearly been the leader across the country in early childhood education" dumbfounded representatives of the early childhood community.

Never mind the fact that she is contradicted by her government's own review agency, and that in June the Canadian Labour Congress placed BC 10th out of 10 provinces in a ranking of childcare performance.

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But not to be outdone by other provinces (see sidebar, page 9), the BC government decided to insert in its Speech from the Throne, the off-the-wall suggestion of providing all-day Kindergarten for three-year-old children. Get real.

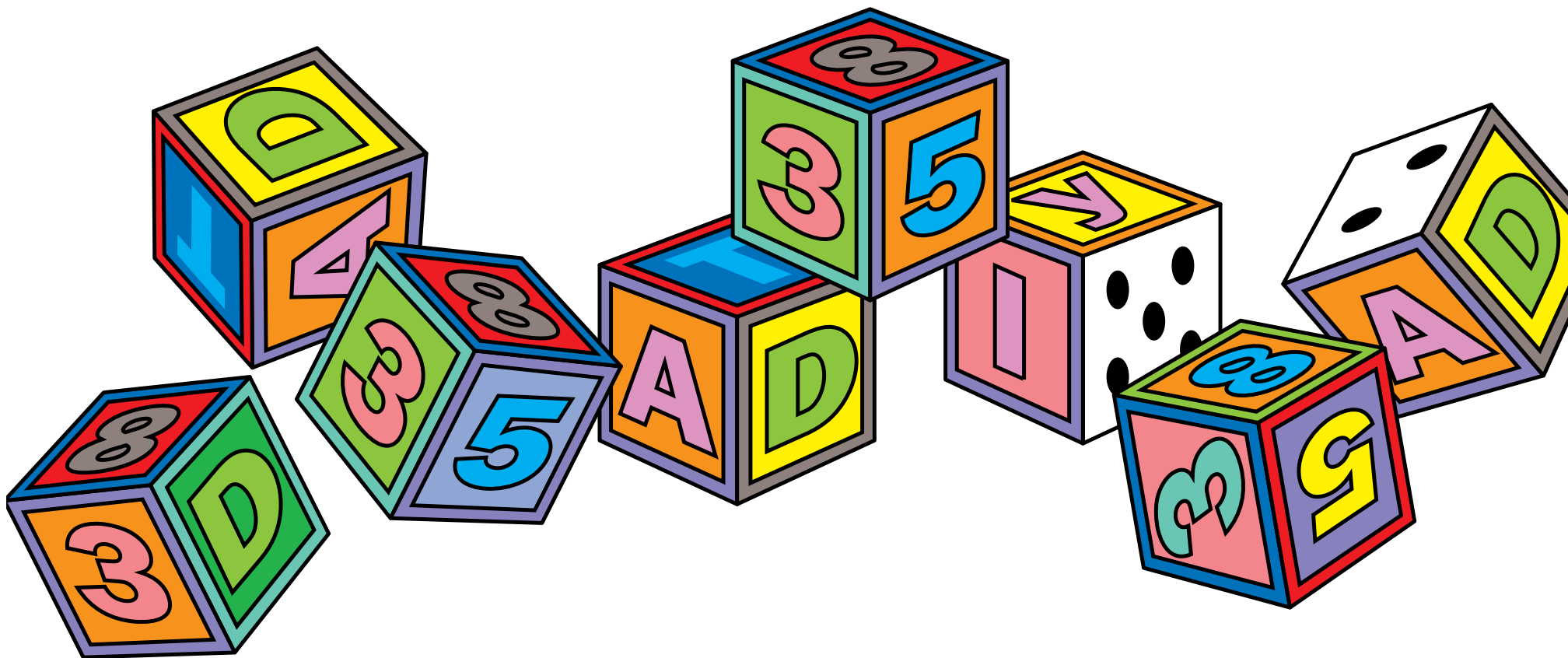
From what we know from contemporary childhood development, coupled with the failure to date to address the realistic and demonstrable needs of four- and five-year-olds in this province, this suggestion for three-year-olds verges on the absurd and should be dismissed as political posturing in the same hyperbolic vein as the Liberals' "Great Goals" in education slogan.

In all of this, the approach of the Ontario provincial government to comprehensive and integrated early childhood reforms stands in stark contrast to what is happening in BC.

The current, ongoing, Ontario early childhood review is being undertaken by Charles Pascal, a respected former deputy education minister, while BC's internal review is being compiled by Ministry of Education and Ministry of Children and Family Development staff.

Pascal's key goal is to provide youngsters in Ontario and their working parents with "seamless" days—ideally providing Kindergarten classes with a play-based curriculum in the same location as daycares—even considering locations outside schools such as churches, community centres, and offices.

Pascal has conducted 15 round tables across that province to date and is a strong advocate for school board flexibility in implementing these universal public school programs.



# Kindergarten denied

And, equally as important, the Ontario government has indicated that it will set aside in excess of \$500 million for phased-in planning, related to space, staffing, professional education, and curriculum development over a two-year period. There is a strong emphasis on providing teachers with early childhood training and experience.

The new mandate expanding boards of education responsibilities in BC to include early learning was proclaimed last year, and since that time school trustees have been left in the dark.

The stunning late-June policy shift (note the timing, with schools closed and the education minister conveniently absent in Beijing leaving senior officials to answer questions) imposing what amounted to a moratorium on school closures, because of a growing fear that there would not be enough space for preschool kids in new programs, points to a total lack of planning and a rushed agenda.

With this u-turn, Ministry of Education officials are now cautioning boards to think carefully about closing additional schools and this comes after pressuring them relentlessly for years to do just that.

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Talk about closing the barn door after the horse has bolted.

With upwards of 177 schools already closed, the BC School Trustees Association now fears that many school boards may not have adequate space—Richmond School District is a good example—for new early childhood programs.

Also, based on past, and some would say bitter, experience, the BCSTA now wants assurances that any new early childhood initiatives will be fully funded so that boards will not be, once more, left holding the bag.

Incidentally, last year parents in two Vancouver schools, Queen Elizabeth Annex and Garibaldi, arguing vociferously against school closures, and pointing to the need for early childhood spaces, were far ahead of the muddled Ministry of Education on this matter.

This confused and changed situation should come as no surprise as BC currently has three ministries dealing with children—the Ministry of

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Education, Ministry of Children and Family Development, and a Minister of State for Childcare.

Overlapping responsibilities, rotating ministers, on-again-off-again programs, one-time grants, a discontinued interministerial committee, and poor planning have dogged these ministries at various times.

## Where does this leave us?

Fear of provincial underfunding, inadequate consultation, lack of coordination, new worries about adequate space, concerns that the needs of poor preschoolers will not be met, and fear about extended delays long after next year's provincial election, all, in varying degrees, argue against obtaining the comprehensive, integrated, quality early childhood programs BC badly needs.

Simply stated, early childhood programs delayed are early childhood programs denied.

BC's preschool children, their parents, grandparents, teachers, family daycare centres and their employees, before-and-after-school-care groups, other caregivers and now school boards, all form part of the new and wider early childhood community in this province.

They certainly deserve much better than the lack of vision and political posturings of the past seven years.

*Noel Herron is a former Vancouver elementary school principal and school trustee. He is the author of the history of Vancouver's inner-city schools entitled "Every Kid Counts."*

## Early childhood education across Canada

The B.C. Early Childhood Learning Agency was set up last February to study the feasibility and cost of all-day Kindergarten for five-year-olds and optional programs for children as young as three.

In an understatement, the agency states "many jurisdictions offer a broader range of programs than those currently available in BC."

### British Columbia

"It is widely recognized that early learning experiences and development play a major role in the child's later academic success. Currently approximately 25 percent of children (in BC) are not ready to learn when they enter Kindergarten."

—BC Speech from the Throne, Feb. 13, 2007

### Alberta

"...establish new junior Kindergartens (for four-year-olds) on a phased-in basis."

"...establish full-day Kindergarten programs (for five-year-olds)."

—Report of Alberta's Commission on Learning, October 2003

Alberta did not implement these recommendations but does offer half-day Kindergarten for five-year-olds and for some four-year-olds.

### Ontario

"Provide full-day junior (four-year-olds) and senior (five-year-olds) Kindergarten programs (especially for families who are otherwise unable to provide such opportunities)."

—The Schools We Need: A New Blueprint for Ontario, April 2003

In Ontario, Toronto inner-city schools have provided junior Kindergarten for four-year-olds the past 45 years. Currently, Ontario offers full-day Kindergarten (no restrictions) for five-year olds.

### Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia

All three provinces "offer full-day Kindergartens for five-year-olds" (no restrictions).

—BC's Consultation Paper, the Early Childhood Learning Agency, June 2008

In Quebec, Montreal inner-city schools have had junior Kindergarten for four-year-olds for over 40 years; 11 years ago, Quebec introduced subsidized, province-wide, daycare and drew strong praise from the international Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

### Yukon and Northwest Territories

Provide all-day Kindergarten (no restrictions).

### Manitoba and Saskatchewan

Both provinces offer half-day Kindergarten for five-year-olds. Saskatchewan is piloting some full-day programs.

## Teacher tips

### Abstract concept best approach

By Kathleen Pirquet

Although I am recently retired, I taught regular and applied math courses for quite a few years, from Grades 7 to 11, and tried just about every conceivable approach to help kids learn math. The most effective and solid results have come from paying sharp attention to the following principles:

1. Work at the correct level for each student, i.e., from concepts the student has already mastered. Nothing makes a train wreck of a class faster than people who are not able to do the basic work that underlies the new material—even follow the lessons. You really have to start with where the students are, and there is no "short cut" around this. We developed pre-tests to give in the first few days of class. Students can be given some choices if their pre-test results are poor: retake the previous course, get a tutor, complete some guided, additional review, etc.
2. Move ahead to new work in relatively small steps with instruction and repetition in appropriate amounts to bring each particular individual to mastery. Avoid excess teaching and repetition for fast learners; provide appropriate support and extra practice for the less gifted. I call this "staging," and it is crucial to building the new frameworks of understanding, and hooking properly into what went before. One size definitely does NOT fit all.
3. Offer rich and varied problem solving and some projects, but only after essential skill mastery and with carefully staged integration of concepts—use lots of group work (explorations and investigations) to accomplish this. Students need the chance to try new things with little or no risk. These tasks need to get to the point without a lot of "friendly concrete examples" and distractions, however. Never lose focus on the math. My problem with a lot of the Addison-Wesley Applied Math activities was that they assumed far higher and broader levels of skills than most of my students had, and they needed students to function at a level significantly above the basic material taught, so that only the very best students felt they could grasp what was wanted or actually do it. The only time the major projects were really successful was when students were walked carefully through them, little step by little step. And many of them still didn't get the point. They certainly didn't feel more competent having the teacher basically do the project for them.
4. Student-controlled timing is very powerful (private practice, public performance, students decide when they are ready to perform, maybe with some teacher input or advice). Flexible, staggered course starts and finishes really help with this. Frog-marching kids through content-packed, time-limited courses often works against us.
5. Do frequent and comprehensive review throughout the year, with repeat performance opportunities to improve achievement. Math competence is accumulative. Students need a chance to develop and demonstrate mastery right up to the end, because it comes gradually for some of them.
6. Evaluate and assess to track the progress of mastery and report on it, but final reports at the end of the course should have no "blending" or "averaging" of formative marks.

This might be done with a series of summative mini-project assignments, maybe a group master project, and a final exam. At the Grade 10 level, while the provincial final exam is completely inappropriate, a departmental final is perfectly reasonable, and could take many forms. Final course evaluations in mathematics should always indicate only "what can this student do now?"

7. We have been allowing students to believe that they should be able to see a "usefulness" for virtually everything we want them to learn. If we can't provide this, they often believe and insist they shouldn't have to learn it.

They constantly ask "Why do I have to learn this; I'll never use it!" I gave up thinking of lists of cool, real-life applications for every little concept, and more or less fell back on something like this: "You need a mind that can understand numbers, numerical relationships, symbol languages and how they work; a mind that can compute, analyze, weigh, judge, evaluate, communicate, reason, imagine, create, use abstractions, and work with agility, precision, and accuracy. Mathematics trains all of that. You can't have any idea what life will offer, or throw at you, so the prudent strategy is to be ready for anything.

A solid grounding in math sets you up for life so that people don't make your decisions for you, con you and rob you blind, take away your power and prey on your confusion. It also opens a lot of doors leading to a richer, more meaningful and more satisfying future. Math helps make you a competent adult in an increasingly complicated world."

Math is an abstraction system that helps us to understand and work in our world. Some parts of math are too abstract for young children. However, early and rich preparation in the symbol language, manipulations of numbers/quantities, and acquiring solid understandings drops the age at which they can begin to grasp some of the frequently more trying abstractions of, for instance, algebra and polynomials, or graphing systems. I have seen even very young children do simple algebra when they were free of fear, competent at some basics, and excited about math. The point is not to teach algebra to little kids, but to do whatever is necessary so that they are ready and can learn better when they reach intermediate and secondary school.

The conclusions of recent math education studies are remarkably consistent with the recommendations of brain-based learning research, as reported by Doidge and others: former learning, small bites, repetition, reflection, practise, autonomy, emotional context, intrinsic reward, concept reinforcement, integration, and application.

For specific topics, there are some good programs out there:

Check out Jump Math (on the web). It is absolutely amazing how well it works, and how much the kids like it. My Grade 10s went from a class average of 15/80 correct multiplication answers in 10 minutes to over 72/80 in 10 minutes in just 36 10-min. lessons. And they would demand a lesson if I forgot. Gary Zak's method for teaching multiplication facts and computations is also worth checking out. It is powerful, engaging, and it works.

Finally, in our quest to improve mathematics learning we need to have math specialists supervising and teaching in every school, especially elementary and middle. The amount of math training currently required for primary and intermediate certification is completely inadequate.

*Kathleen Pirquet is a retired Victoria area math teacher.*

