



FULL-DAY EARLY LEARNING KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM

**for
Four- and Five-Year-Olds**

*A Reference Guide
for Educators*



Issue #1



Ontario will provide a full day of learning to four- and five-year-olds as part of the province's plan to build a stronger school system and a well-educated workforce. The program will be phased in gradually over time, starting in September 2010. Up to 35,000 four- and five-year-olds in 579 schools will benefit from the first phase of the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program in September 2010. The goal is to have it fully implemented by 2015-16.



Ontario is investing in the education of its youngest students to better prepare them for future success. The Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program will support their social, emotional and cognitive development. This includes improved reading, writing and math skills and a smoother transition to Grade 1. It will help more students achieve success at school and help create a stronger economy for the future.



Beginning a Conversation for Success



Environment, Learning and Partners

As a select group of education leaders who will implement the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program, you have been given a unique opportunity to explore and develop effective practices. What are the necessary conditions for successful implementation of the core and extended-day programs for four- and five-year-olds? What kinds of learning environments and organizational structures will support these programs, and the success of these young students? How can the new *Full-Day Early Learning—Kindergarten Program* inform our practice, and enrich our work as a community of professional learners? How can we build effective partnerships that bring out the best in us as principals, teachers and early childhood educators, and in parents and community partners, for the benefit of students?

This document is intended as the starting point of a conversation for excellence in each of these critical areas. The results of these conversations—and your individual and collective experiences in implementing the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program—will serve as a foundation and model for provincewide implementation and ongoing program quality improvement.

Environment

Young children thrive in early learning settings that meet their physical and developmental needs, and that provide a secure, respectful and nurturing environment.

An integrated extended-day model

The integrated extended-day model for four- and five-year-olds consists of an instructional day program and an integrated extended-day program, with encouragement to provide year-round programming. The core day program is delivered by a certified teacher and a registered early childhood educator (ECE) supporting 26 students. An early childhood educator is responsible for the extended-day component.

A healthy physical environment

The physical environment can affect both conditions for learning and opportunities for physical activity and healthy living. The physical environment includes the school building and grounds, routes to and from the school, and materials and equipment used in school programs.

A supportive social environment

A supportive social environment has a positive impact on children's learning. Children are better equipped and more motivated to do well and achieve their full potential in schools that have a positive school climate where they feel safe and supported. A culture of respect, founded in mutual acceptance and inclusion, benefits children, parents and early learning teams.

School-community partnerships

School-community partnerships provide access to resources and services that can provide additional support to school staff, children and families in developing a healthy school environment.

Organizing the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program within the school

Principals, along with program resource staff, are key to maintaining a supportive focus on the creation of high-quality, play-based learning experiences by each teacher and ECE team. High-quality, early learning program experiences are best achieved through active principal leadership and engagement with the teacher and ECE partners, parents and families.

TOP TEN TIPS FOR PRINCIPALS*

- (1) Take time to understand why early learning is such an important factor for the success of your children and their families. *With Our Best Future in Mind* helps you to put this in context and understand the evidence that influenced Ontario's approach
- (2) Build a vision and understanding of this essential Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program with the whole staff. Help them understand how this will benefit the whole school community and the community at large
- (3) Be a visible and available support to the early learning teams while constantly encouraging the highest-quality, play-based programming
- (4) Help to develop the relationships and the professional capacities of the early learning team and to ensure strong and effective parent partnership strategies
- (5) Prepare a plan for the transition to the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program
- (6) Include all early learning team members in all staff meetings
- (7) Where possible, create opportunities for the early learning team to discuss program delivery together
- (8) Encourage ongoing professional growth and networking with other early learning teams in other schools and support and use research and evaluation that can help to support program improvements
- (9) Talk with and learn from other principals who have experience leading schools with full-day kindergarten
- (10) Encourage the early learning team to invite early years coordinators and other specialists to work with them

*As provided by principals who already operate exemplary full-day, every day and/or integrated extended-day programs.



Learning

The new *Full-Day Early Learning—Kindergarten Program* and *Extended Day Program* for four- and five-year-olds is based on the most current research into high-quality, developmentally enriched, early learning instructional practices.

The importance of early learning

Currently, about one-quarter of children in Canada are vulnerable when they enter Grade 1. The Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program is vitally important to ensuring that we can significantly increase the number of children who are fully prepared for formal learning and for greater success in life.

Children's early learning experiences have a profound effect on their development. Early learning experiences are opportunities to develop learning strategies including how to plan, monitor, reflect, investigate and solve problems, as well as exchange points of view and represent ideas. The learning strategies that children acquire in the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program will affect later learning and behaviour.

The child as learner

Children are part of a complex, inter-related unit that includes the child, the family, the school, the broader community, and the world. Thinking about these components in isolation is not as effective as considering the inter-relationships among them. The Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program builds on the inter-relationships among and between these systems, and is designed to set the child on a positive learning trajectory.

Young children learn best through activities that are relevant to their lives and varied enough to be challenging and engaging. Children develop their knowledge by building on their past experiences, prior learning, individual interests and learning styles. When children's introduction to school is an enjoyable experience, they are naturally inclined to learn and are eager to be part of the school environment.

Diverse learners

Children are unique with individual needs. They develop at different rates and in different ways. In addition, the diverse family, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of each child contribute to variations in the ways in which they develop and demonstrate their learning. Children therefore need opportunities to learn in an appropriate manner, and learning environments need to be adjusted to their stages of development. They also need to be given learning opportunities that are within the range of things they can do, with and without guidance, that meets their individual needs. The Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program offers more time for individual and small group interactions between children and educators.

The Full-Day Early Learning—Kindergarten Program and Extended Day Program

These programs provide a balance of investigation or exploration, and guided and explicit instruction through play-based learning. Children need many opportunities to investigate and explore. These experiences allow children to build on their existing knowledge, create and clarify their own new understandings, and experience a variety of approaches to a problem or question. The early learning team should observe, listen, and question in order to provide students with the support they need.

Intentional play-based learning

It has long been acknowledged that there is a strong link between play and learning for young children, especially in areas of problem solving, language acquisition, literacy, numeracy, and in development of social,

physical and emotional skills. Effective classrooms in the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program take advantage of play, and embed intentional opportunities for learning in the physical environment, and play activities. Children initiate free play, and engage in more structured play-based learning opportunities under the guidance of the early learning team. The learning activities designed by the teacher and the ECE encourage children to think creatively, to explore and investigate, to solve problems, to engage in the inquiry process, and to share their learning with others.

EXAMPLES OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING

At the water centre, several children test the boats that they have designed and observe how many shells each will hold before it sinks. As one child places the shells in a boat, another keeps track of the number of shells using a simple tally. As the children are working, a member of the early learning team challenges the children to focus on the boat that held the most shells before sinking and explore how it is different from the other boats.

A small group of children makes several attempts to build a tower as tall as they are. Through trial and error, they discover that if they make the bottom of the tower wider they can build it taller. They record pictorially the finished product and label the pictures to show their solution.

After making bird feeders from recycled materials, the children place them in the tree outside their classroom window. They observe and record the activity that takes place at each of the feeders. With support from the teacher and early childhood educator, and based on their own observations, some of the children make modifications to their feeders and place them back outside to observe the effect of the changes on the birds' activity.



Assessment in the Full-Day Early Learning—Kindergarten Program

Assessment is key to effective teaching and is the starting point for instruction in the *Full-Day Early Learning—Kindergarten Program*. A well-planned program provides the early learning team with many opportunities for ongoing observation and assessment of children's strengths, needs and interests. On the basis of this ongoing assessment, the team should discuss each day's activities to help students build on what they know, and extend their learning. Teachers are responsible for using the team's assessment to evaluate children's progress in attaining the identified learning expectations before entry to Grade 1. The learning expectations for the *Full-Day Early Learning—Kindergarten Program* are similar to those identified for the *Kindergarten Program* (2006).

REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS

The early learning team members, including the principal, are reflective practitioners who constantly learn from interactions with children and their parents, which is key to program improvement and professional development.





PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

The early learning team decides during a planning meeting to ask questions that encourage more complex sentences, such as, “I wonder, how do you cook food in the wok?” Or “The red sari has many designs. I see things that shine. What do you see?” Team members agree that they will continue to ask questions that encourage children to express more of their thinking.

Members of the early learning team meet to analyze their observations of children’s play at the water table. The children have been beginning to explore the concept of capacity by filling containers with water. During discussions, team members agree that the materials at the centre are critical to challenging and extending the children’s understanding of capacity. They decide to remove sea creatures and boats that are not relevant to the investigation of capacity and to replace them with different types of containers (e.g., containers of different shapes, heights, widths, and so on).

Members of the early learning team view a video of children investigating the properties of water. As they watch, they compare their observations, taking note of the way children approach and learn from the activity. They then discuss among themselves ways of extending the children’s learning with further opportunities for exploration and inquiry.





Partners

Effective early learning for children arises from the development of meaningful partnerships between parents and families, teachers, early childhood educators, school leaders and the broader community.

Building on complementary strengths and perspectives

Both teachers and early childhood educators (ECEs) are certified/registered within their respective regulatory bodies, namely the Ontario College of Teachers and the College of Early Childhood Educators, who set the minimum training and education requirements for their professions. As stated in the *Full-Day Early Learning—Kindergarten Program*, knowledgeable and responsive educators are essential. Both professional groups concur that their role in supporting children and families remains paramount. Like any two or more individuals coming together to work in a team, each brings individual strengths and perspectives, as well as a set of professional competencies, demonstrating a breadth of professional knowledge, skills and abilities. Both individuals therefore come prepared to work together, building on their strengths and expertise, to create a dynamic professional team to support children and families in full-day early learning settings.

The early learning professional team

Professional educators recognize and value that every child is a unique individual. So too must we recognize and value that each team of early childhood educator(s) and a teacher will be somewhat unique. Both teachers and early childhood educators will have the benefit of a collaborative and complementary partnership to support children and families in a high-quality, intentional, play-based learning environment.

Based on their broad knowledge of, and experience within the school environment, teachers are responsible for the long-term planning and organization of the *Full-Day Early Learning—Kindergarten Program*.

This sets the framework within which early childhood educators and teachers will work together through a holistic and integrated approach with particular emphasis on:

- jointly developing and delivering the daily activities in the classroom, including an emphasis on spontaneity to respond to the children’s needs and interests;
- organizing the indoor and outdoor learning environments;
- using a repertoire of pedagogical strategies to challenge and extend children’s learning;
- monitoring and assessing children’s progress using observation and pedagogical documentation;
- liaising with families and the broader community; and
- assisting children during daily routines.

Teachers

Recognizing their unique qualifications and experiences, teachers are responsible for elements of the learning-teaching process that they have under *The Education Act* and related regulations. Through their pre-service and in-service education, teachers possess a unique knowledge set related to the broader elementary program context, curriculum, assessment, evaluation and reporting, and child development.

Teachers are also responsible for student learning, effective instruction, formative assessment (assessment for learning) and evaluation of the learning of the children enrolled in their classes, the management of early learning kindergarten classes and formal reporting and communication with families about the progress of their children. Teachers evaluate student learning and report to parents based on the early learning professional team’s assessments of children’s progress within the context of the *Full-Day Early Learning—Kindergarten Program*.

Early childhood educators

Based on their unique qualifications and experiences, early childhood educators bring their knowledge of early childhood development, observation and assessment.

ECEs bring a focus on age-appropriate program planning to facilitate experiences that promote each child's physical, cognitive, language, emotional, social and creative development and well-being, providing opportunities for them to contribute to formative assessment (assessment for learning) and evaluation of the children's learning.

Early childhood educators will also use their knowledge base and abilities as they implement the integrated extended day.

The role of parents and families

Parents and families are children's first and most significant teachers and role models and offer learning opportunities based on the deep knowledge they have of their children. Children's learning and development happens within the context of their daily lives, in families and communities. Thus, the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program is a dynamic process supported by parents, families and other caregivers who nurture and teach children in their homes and communities. Families are an integral—and visible—part of the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program who, working together with teachers and ECEs, can support and foster a positive learning environment at home and at school. The early learning team and parents will enjoy mutual respect and reciprocal learning, including an appreciation for parents' knowledge of their own children, which will only benefit the children in the program.

The role of principals

The principal is an integral part of the early learning team, who works in partnership with teachers, early childhood educators, parents and families to ensure that each child has access to the best possible early learning experiences. Principals ensure that the Full-Day Early Learning

Kindergarten Program is based on developmentally appropriate, enriched practices, and that it reflects research-based, pedagogically sound practices that support all children and their families. Both the teacher and ECE report to the principal, who plays an essential role in building professional learning communities and creating open lines of communication between the school and parents of children in the program.

The role of community partners

It is essential that the early learning team works to identify the strengths, needs and unique characteristics of the community, and collaborates with other significant partners in the community to ensure the best possible transition to school for each child. By welcoming and including a child's family members and others from the community into the school community, ECEs, teachers and other members of the school staff can ensure that they remain ongoing partners in each child's education.

This discussion guide is one of many resources being developed to support your work in implementing the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program. The Ministry of Education acknowledges the important contribution you are making to take this exciting initiative from vision to reality in Ontario schools. Through your efforts and expertise, Ontario's children will be getting the strongest possible start in life, and the greatest opportunity to experience success as future contributors to the social, cultural and economic future of our province.





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