

Is Full Day Kindergarten a Good Idea? Rita Chudnovsky, M. Ed

For many BC child care advocates, the expansion of kindergarten is a significant and promising development. We believe that, if done well, building on the elements of public kindergarten can and will make a real difference in the lives of children, families, caregivers and communities.

To understand why, it's important to start with Canada and BC's shameful record on meeting the needs of our very young children. Although Canada is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, we rank last amongst OECD countries in providing public funding for and access to quality early learning and child care services. (See Charts 1 & 2) And, a 2008 UNICEF report puts Canada last out of 25 developed countries in achieving family policy benchmarks that support young children. (See Chart 3)

Every day, BC children, families and communities struggle with the realities of the resulting child care crisis. While mothers of young children, including many teachers, are in the paid labour force in unprecedented numbers, there is still only a licensed child care space for 15 % of BC children under 12. Parent fees, which generally cover about 80% of the cost of child care, are higher than post-secondary tuition and for some families, more than their monthly mortgage payment. And, wages earned by college trained early childhood educators remain at poverty levels.

This situation persists despite the mounting evidence that the child's first few years of life lay the groundwork for lifelong health and development and that quality experiences during those early years matter.

So, what is the problem? Well, unlike school, child care is NOT a system. There is no legislated right to participate in quality child care. There is no accountable level of government with a mandate to plan, develop and deliver child care. There is minimal direct funding to cover the operating costs of child care. And, while educated, dedicated early childhood educators do a heroic job of providing the best quality they can, they are working in a patchwork of disconnected services where parent[s] and children are consumers rather than citizens with rights.

In this context, it is a victory that this provincial government has accepted that young children have a **right** to universal, publicly funded democratically controlled services, where the people who nurture them are respected and relatively well paid. After 30 years of advocacy for a child care system built on these very principles, it offers an opportunity for progress that we cannot ignore.

That doesn't mean that we don't have serious questions and concerns. Like many teachers, we have little reason to trust that, on their own, this government will put the interests of children and working families first. So, if the expansion of Kindergarten is going to move us forward - it must be done well.

First, doing it well means ensuring that early care and learning programs meet the developmental needs of all children. For starters, BC must end the false divide between child care, which is the responsibility of the Ministry of Children and Family Development, and early learning, the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

The research, evidence and lived experience of BC children and families make it clear that, for young children, learning occurs in the context of caring relationships and play-based, developmentally appropriate experiences throughout children's waking hours – not in neatly defined time slots, whether called 'school' or 'child care'.

We share very legitimate worries about a narrow 'school readiness' approach and the downward extension of standardized testing to ever younger children. For us, doing it well means reframing 'readiness' to a focus on schools that are ready for children. It also means being open to the potential that the best of early childhood education practice can have a positive upward influence on the whole education system.

Doing it well also means that expanded kindergarten programs meet the needs of working families, for whom the term All Day Kindergarten is a misnomer. At best, current plans call for *full school-day, full school-year kindergarten*. Let's be clear. The majority of mothers of 4 and 5 year olds are in the paid labour force to stay. Most of them need full day, full year care for their children – not instead of learning but as an integrated and equal part of a universal system of early care and learning.

Not surprisingly, doing it well also means providing adequate resources to ensure programs are sustainable and that other children's services don't pay the price. For child care, it means ensuring quality services for all are sustained and expanded as 4 and 5 year olds move into the public education system - no matter how the 'school day' ends up being defined. For schools, it means no cuts to other parts of the system in order to fund expanded kindergarten.

Finally, doing it well means finding new ways to respect and value the contribution that both teachers and early childhood educators can make to a universal, integrated, publicly funded high quality system of early care and learning.

It appears that plans to offer full school day Kindergarten to more 5 year olds by next fall are proceeding without much public dialogue about these essential elements. Perhaps that is because kindergarten for 5 year olds is already an accepted and expected part of our community. However, the projected expansion of early learning for 4 year olds, and then potentially for even younger children, pushes the envelope in fundamental ways. Before that happens we need concrete policy recommendations for advancing an integrated system of early care and learning that gets it right for children from birth to 12.

That is why the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and the Early Childhood Educators of BC have launched a new project – **“Moving to a System of Integrated Early Care and Learning in BC.”** Over the coming year, we will examine the relationship between free, universal and publicly-funded full school-day kindergarten for 5 and 4 year olds and BC's existing child care services. We will explore models and approaches from elsewhere and develop our vision for what a truly integrated system of early care and learning in BC could look like.

We look forward to an open dialogue with the BCTF and teachers across BC as we build this vision. We know that together, we will need to mobilize our sectors and communities to build an integrated system that meets the developmental needs of young children, supports working families and values the work of all those who care for and teach them.

Chart 1 - Spending on Early Learning and Child Care Programs

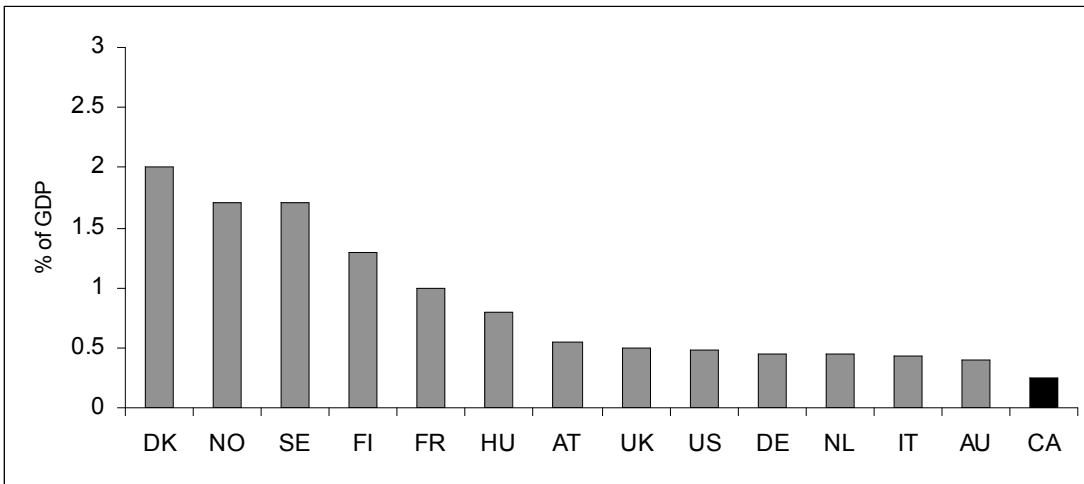
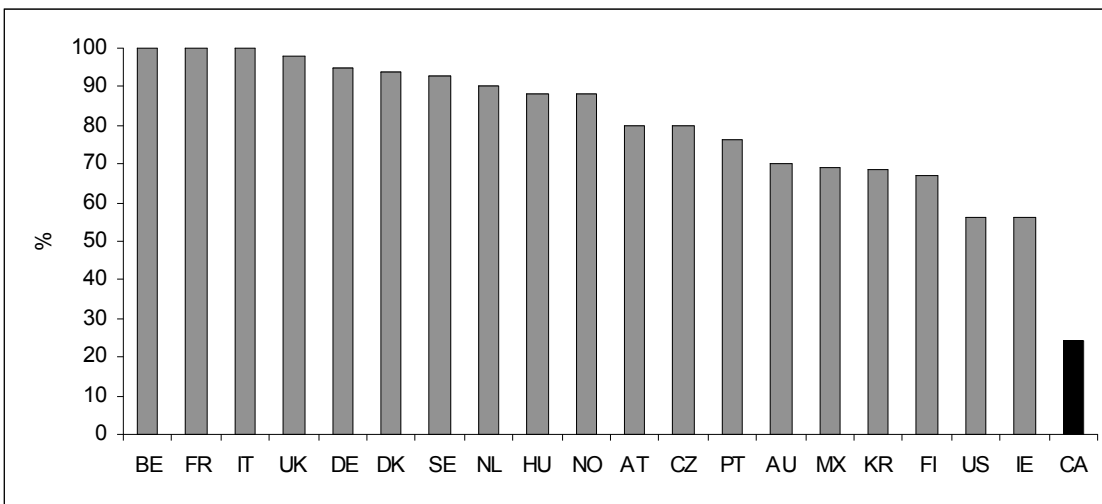


Chart 2 - Rate of access to Early Learning and Child Care Programs for 3-6 year olds



Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care. Country Profiles.*

Chart 3 - Family Policy Score - Out of 10.

Source – UNICEF, 2008. The child care transition: A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries. In *Innocenti Report Card 8*.

Sweden	10
Iceland	9
Denmark	8
Finland	8
France	8
Norway	8
Belgium (Flanders)	6
Hungary	6
New Zealand	6
Slovenia	6
Austria	5
Netherlands	5
United Kingdom*	5
Germany	4
Italy	4
Japan	4
Portugal	4
Republic of Korea	4
Mexico	3
Spain	3
Switzerland	3
United States	3
Australia	2
Canada	1
Ireland	1