



July 8, 2008

Ms. Susan Kennedy, Executive Director
Early Childhood Learning Agency
5th Fl., 620 Superior St
Victoria, BC V8W 9H3

Dear Ms. Kennedy,

Thank you for meeting with our Board of Directors. BCSTA appreciates the opportunity to provide initial input to the Early Childhood Learning Agency (ECLA). We understand that this is the first phase of the Agency's consultation process and that the questions posed are intentionally at a high level. However, we are concerned that the short timeline for feedback at this point in the school year will mean that many boards of education will not have an opportunity to discuss adequately this important matter with their communities. Accordingly, rather than expressing a definitive position, the following comments reflect areas we feel require more detailed consideration by the ECLA and other stakeholders. Many of our comments are similar for all four questions posed by the ECLA, so we have combined them into one set of responses with differences between the various programs noted where appropriate.

The primary mandate of BCSTA is to support boards of education in their key work of enhancing achievement for all learners. Therefore, any implementation of full-day kindergarten or pre-kindergarten would need to be predicated on long-term beneficial educational outcomes over other considerations. Furthermore, we believe strongly that any expansion of early learning programs must be adequately resourced so as not to diminish existing education programs in any way.

Considerations Related to Children

1. Although many children may be able to manage full-day kindergarten, and indeed may already be in full-day daycare/kindergarten programs, it may also be a burden for others. Depending on their level of physical, emotional and social development some children may not be ready for a full-day program. This is of even greater concern when considering programs for four- and three-year-olds. While we support the concept that early childhood learning increases a child's readiness for, and potential success in school, we cannot assume that all children would benefit from a full-day program. Students with the most significant readiness deficits may in fact be better served by shorter programs focused specifically on their particular developmental needs.
2. Care will need to be taken to ensure that there is not a "pushing down" of curriculum into early learning programs. The goal must be to increase readiness for regular school programs, rather than to expand regular programs into earlier years.

BCSTA Response

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3. Existing research suggests that the differences between children who have attended full-day kindergarten programs compared to those who have not tends to dissipate by the middle elementary grades (please see attached document: *Full-Day Kindergarten - A Research Guide for Policymakers*, BCSTA, 2005). Unless other long-term benefits are evident it is questionable whether this would be the best learning investment the government could make.

Considerations Related to Infrastructure

1. The Ministry of Education has rightly identified that the implementation of full-day kindergarten, and particularly pre-kindergarten, would place significant demands on classroom space in many school districts. For the last several years many boards have been closing and selling schools due to declining enrollments and increasing financial needs. A comprehensive review of space implications for affected elementary schools would need to be undertaken before full-day kindergarten/pre-kindergarten programs could be implemented. It would be unacceptable if there were negative impacts on classroom conditions for existing programs.
2. While most existing elementary schools are already appropriately equipped for kindergarten classes, many would have to be upgraded for pre-kindergarten programs. Changes to washrooms, furniture, playgrounds, and even perimeter fencing may be required.
3. Consideration must also be given to transportation implications of implementing full-day kindergarten/pre-kindergarten programs. Although many kindergarten students currently travel to and from school by bus, the lengthy commutes that would be required in many districts may be too onerous for younger children. It is also likely that buses would need to be retrofitted with appropriate seating and safety devices for smaller children.
4. Full-day kindergarten and pre-kindergarten raises several questions related to staffing. Full-day kindergarten would require more kindergarten teachers than currently exist. Given the training required it is questionable whether the demand could be met in the short term. The increased need for Early Childhood Education instructors for pre-kindergarten is even more problematic as a shortage already exists.
5. Additional staff would also likely be required to accommodate increased assessment, identification and support for children with special learning needs. Apart from the costs that would be incurred by boards of education, we have concerns regarding the availability of the appropriately trained individuals who would be required.
6. Full-day kindergarten/pre-kindergarten will likely increase demand for before- and after-school care in a market where shortages already exist.

Considerations Related to Funding

1. As stated above, any expansion of kindergarten/pre-kindergarten programs must be fully supported by new funds so as not to exacerbate already stressed budgets for existing K-12 programs.

2. The potential source of funds is also problematic. If full-day kindergarten/pre-kindergarten programs were to be fully funded by the government, arguments could be made that K-12 programs should be more adequately supported before new programs are brought on line. There may also be concerns if some or all of the funds are provided through private partnerships.
3. Consideration should also be given to whether this would be the best use of the millions of dollars required to implement and sustain full-day kindergarten/pre-kindergarten programs. A case might be made that it would be better to direct the funds specifically to those children who are at the highest risk rather than implementing universal programs. Rather than these programs resulting in increased achievement overall, a universal plan could widen achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children.

In summary, BCSTA is fully supportive of programs that will enhance student achievement and close current achievement gaps. Existing research and experience in other jurisdictions suggests that full-day kindergarten/pre-kindergarten programs have the potential to achieve these goals for many children. However, the feasibility of implementing such programs must be studied fully to determine the long-term implications for existing programs and students. We strongly encourage the ECLA to engage in a thorough review of the above points and to ensure that all stakeholder groups – and particularly boards of education – are fully involved.

Once again, BCSTA appreciates the opportunity to provide this initial feedback for your consideration. We look forward to a more detailed consultation process in the near future.

Sincerely,



Connie Denesiuk
President

C: The Honourable Shirley Bond, Minister of Education
 James Gorman, Deputy Minister of Education

Attachment: *Full-Day Kindergarten - A Research Guide for Policymakers*, BCSTA, 2005