

## **New all-day early learning program**

By Jane Whiting

January and February is the time to begin registering for kindergarten in September. This year, four- and five-year-olds can start a full day of early learning in Ontario's public system with a new program which is to be gradually phased in at more schools across the province. The following information is compiled (from school board and Ministry of Education sources) to help inform parents about the new Early Learning Program, its availability and other options.

**How many schools will offer the program?** Currently, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board proposed 22 elementary schools and the Ottawa Catholic School Board has recommended 11 school sites, with a possible nine additional schools on the list, for approval for September 2010. The school boards can provide a list of recommended schools, with confirmation due in mid-January. They have also identified other schools which will be considered for the 2011-12 school year, with full program implementation planned for 2015-16.

**Where are the schools and who will have access?** The criteria for the recommended school sites included locations with available space as well as ones that serve low-income families and areas where affordable day-care was available for before- and after-school times. It is estimated that approximately 15 percent of children enrolled in kindergarten for September will have access to the full-day program.

**How will the new kindergarten program be delivered?** Teachers and early childhood educators will work together to deliver a new early learning program during regular school hours. There will be two teaching professionals in the classroom for the day to provide one-on-one attention and opportunities to learn together in small groups. An extended before- and after-school program, led by early childhood educators, will be available for a reasonable fee with some subsidies based on financial need.

**When does enrolment for the early learning program take place?** As soon as the schools boards announce which schools will host phase one of the program, families who live within the boundary area of a listed school will be able to register their children in the full-day early learning program. This will be done through the

school's regular registration process which usually starts in February for September enrolment.

**When will full-day early learning begin in all areas?** More schools will be added as full-day early learning is phased in over time to ensure that the implementation is responsible and affordable. The Ontario government intends to work with school boards, educators, child care providers, municipalities and other partners in communities across the province as they move forward with implementation.

**How much will it cost to enroll a child?** The regular school day portion of the full-day early learning program for four- and five-year-olds will be part of Ontario's publicly funded school system. There will be no cost for this part of a child's day. Details of the fee for the extended program offered before and after regular school hours, will soon be available from the school boards, together with information on subsidies.

**Is full-day early learning mandatory for four- and five-year-olds?** No. The early learning program, like kindergarten, will remain optional for four- and five-year-olds. In Ontario, children are required to attend school once they turn six years old. Although kindergarten is voluntary, 90 percent of eligible children are enrolled.

**Do children have to attend the extended day program?** No. The extended day program is optional.

**What will children learn and do in a full-day early learning program?** Full-day learning will provide four- and five-year-olds with more opportunities to socialize with their peers and develop the academic and social skills necessary for school, including laying the foundation for each child's reading, writing and math skills.

A new curriculum, based largely on the current Kindergarten Program, will be developed for full-day early learning. Through instruction and play-based learning, children will develop their capacity in language and mathematics, build a strong foundation for future learning, engage in healthy physical activities and the arts, and develop socially and emotionally through interaction with their peers and the adults who teach and guide them.

**Will schools that have an existing early learning program for four- and five-year-olds still offer the program?** Schools that offer a full-day kindergarten or an

early learning program can continue to offer full-day programming for their students.

**Can four- or five-year-olds who are not in the new full-day early learning program, still have access to childcare?** Yes. Parents will continue to have choices on childcare arrangements. Licensed childcare centres, home daycare and after-school recreational programs will continue to be available. Childcare operators make decisions about their programs based in large part on community and parental need, and this will not change when full-day early learning is introduced.

**Why full-day learning? Isn't a half-day enough for young children?** Many four- and five-year-olds already spend long days in a mix of childcare and kindergarten. Providing children with a stronger start on their learning will improve their reading, writing and math skills, provide a smoother transition to Grade 1 and help more students graduate. This new approach to early learning offers children an enriched learning environment designed to help them develop the foundational social, emotional, academic and physical skills necessary to succeed in school and in life.

*This article originally appeared in the \_\_\_\_\_ 2009 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper.*