More than a quarter of Alberta kids face ‘great difficulty’ when starting kindergarten

BY RICHARD CUTHBERTSON, CALGARY HERALD  JUNE 25, 2012

A sweeping study of thousands of Calgary and Alberta kindergarten children is unmasking some hard truths that could have major public policy implications for schools, the city and the province.

In Alberta, 27 per cent of kids entering the school system in kindergarten suffer “great difficulty” in one of five areas of development — a rate slightly worse than the Canadian average — according to early results from a massive five-year project being conducted by Alberta Education.

It’s a mediocre showing that Susan Lynch, director of the Early Child Development Mapping Initiative,
calls disappointing in a province famous for prosperity, decent education levels and a large number of young families.

If a quarter of young children are struggling, she warned, there’s “work to do around here.”

Calgary does somewhat better than the province as a whole and is also ahead of Edmonton.

But a separate assessment spearheaded by Calgary’s public education system this year reveals some stark differences between schools.

Many kids are heading into kindergarten just fine. However, up to half of the children in some of the city’s poorer neighbourhoods have “some” or “significant” difficulty in things such as communication and cognitive development.

“It’s a compelling call to action,” said Joan Green, the system principal for early learning at the Calgary Board of Education.

Some parents, she said, are working two jobs to makes ends meet and are “flat out.” They often can’t afford preschool, passes to the zoo or the time to take their children to the playground.

In essence, both the public board and the provincial assessments are asking the same question: What kind of children are coming into the school system?

The results, when they are all collected and examined, will probably have significant influence over future provincial, municipal and school board policy.

Educators hope the data can be used by communities to figure out how to improve their neighbourhood services for children.

At Calgary public schools, things are already shifting under the assessment they brought in this year, the Early Years Evaluation (EYE). It’s helped the school board better understand where to target its resources.

Principals with large numbers of delayed students brandished, for the first time, hard data as they lobbied supervisors for more help from educational assistants and therapists.

Kindergarten teachers use the evaluation to quickly figure out where children are having trouble, sorting out specific activities to help them improve.

In some cases, they report major turnarounds in just eight months.

The results will probably add to the simmering debate on whether the province should fund all-day kindergarten, a pricey promise the Redford government has made but not yet acted upon.

A recent study in Ontario found all-day kindergarten children learned reading and math better than half-day kids. The program costs Ontario $1.5 billion a year.
This year, just 16 of 122 public elementary schools in Calgary offer full-day kindergarten, using money scraped together from the central school board budget. The rest are half-day.

“Every year, we cross our fingers in waiting,” said Karen Frick, an all-day kindergarten teacher at Radisson Park School.

Her colleague, Laura Ferguson, recalls when Radisson Park used to offer both full-day and half. Deciding which kid got into the popular full-day program and which didn’t was like “playing God.”

Three years ago, Alberta Education began the massive Early Child Mapping Initiative, structured around the Early Development Instrument.

The work intends to survey 100,000 children in every corner of the province, underlaying the results with socioeconomic data that looks at things such as income and education levels of adults in their neighbourhoods.

The survey involves 58 questions on a child’s social, emotional, physical and intellectual development.

Are they dressed properly? Hungry? Can they tell a story? Do they know how to turn the page of a book? Can they write their name, count to 20? Do they cry a lot, seem sad, nervous or shy?

Calgary public school EYE looks at many of the same qualities — cognitive, language, motor skills, self-awareness and social skills.

At Valley View School, an elementary school in Dover, this year’s enrolment is 280 students.

But it’s a transient group: About 70 per cent of the children either arrived part way through the year, or left part way through, according to Principal Kevin Bauer.

In one kindergarten class, the sharp differences in the development of the children are clear from the journals that catalogue a school year’s worth of work.

One boy began the fall unable to hold a pencil. His attempts at writing the alphabet resulted in feeble scribbles, and he couldn’t cut a circle from a piece of paper.

His counterpart, a girl of about the same age is leaps ahead. At the beginning of the year she could print the entire alphabet. But there’s good news at Valley View: With eight-months’ work, the boy can now print words and his journal shows he’s catching up to his classmates.

His teacher even held an “EYE Party,” because the class results had improved so much when the children were reassessed a few weeks ago.

“Being in a school, you can’t know everything about everyone and all things,” Bauer said.

“But this was a very clear and really succinct way for me to know, to have a really good overview of who we have in our school.”
In many ways, the assessments are now spelling out things that many working in the classrooms have known for years.

Five years ago, the Calgary Catholic School District started its first preschool at Holy Cross in Dover, one that is only for children from families who don’t speak English as a first language.

The point isn’t to teach them their ABCs, but to get them speaking English so they’re not behind their peers when they hit kindergarten.

The preschool program has now grown to 11 schools, including Corpus Christi in Thorncliffe, and 315 pupils, aged between 3.5 years old and 4.5 years old.

“We’re not going to stand up and say ‘We’re going to learn the numbers one to five today.’ It’s all through play-based activities,” said Patrice Docherty, the district’s preschool consultant, during a recent stop at Corpus Christi.

For those who doubt that one year in kindergarten is long enough to make change, Lucy Pearson’s class at Chief Justice Milvain School in northeast Calgary has shown promising results.

Here’s how her cohort of 20 kindergarten children stacked up in October: 14 had some problems in at least one of six development categories, and six of those had at least one significant delay.

By the end of May, her EYE chart had changed dramatically. Almost every child is on track now — even those who struggled the most at the beginning of the year.

At schools such as these, kindergarten teachers accept nothing less. Pearson said there’s no reason they can’t have their children ready to enter Grade 1 at the same level as those in wealthier parts of the city.

ruthbertson@calgaryherald.com

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