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**Rapinder Rai prepares her classroom at Harry Sayers Elementary School. New all-day kindergarten classes begin across the province today.**



photo by John Van Putten

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By Grant Granger - Abbotsford News  
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While elementary schools across British Columbia gear up to deal with going to all-day kindergarten for the first time, it won't be much of a change for Harry Sayers Elementary in Abbotsford.

The school on Blue Ridge Drive has had three full-day kindergarten classes for several years because many of the kids in its catchment area are English as a Second Language (ESL) students. The province has long provided funding for all-day K to ESL, aboriginal and special education students.

Rapinder Rai is heading into her eighth year of teaching the full day program and she says the teachers, parents and kids across the district and province will like it.

"There's more time to play, and this is a play-based learning environment," said Rai as she

sorted through the stuffed animals, puzzles, building blocks, paint brushes, crayons and notebooks in her room while getting ready for the first day of school.

In kindergarten, said Rai, the emphasis is on social and emotional development to help with the transition to full-time learning.

Critics of the full-time concept say it takes away from the fun kids at that age can have on their own or with friends.

But that can happen in school as well, because to Rai it's a good day when her kids go home dirty from building sand castles, bouncing around the playground or painting.

"Now with the hand-held gadgets and the screen time that children spend, we need to focus more on the social aspects of things," said Rai. "Children are getting away from reality, and sitting face-to-face with somebody and making eye contact, those are skills they need."

Last year, Abbotsford had 420 all-day kindergarten students.

This year, the projection for all-day K pupils is 893, requiring the hiring of about 10 more teachers.

In total, the district expects to have nearly 1,400 kindergarten students.

"We have been doing full-day K for some time. We understand it well and the support we need to put in place for the teachers to do it and do it well has been there," said Kevin Godden, the district's acting secretary-treasurer.

"Clearly the benefits are there for us to continue to support our kindergarten teachers for that in year two."

Finding room in the other 12 elementaries that won't go all day until next year has been "tricky," but it's under control now, said Godden.

While the ministry pays for the extra student base (about \$1.5 million for 2010-11, and about the same, or more, on top of that in 2011-12), most of the capital costs for changing school configurations are paid by the district.

The province did help out, however, by committing new portable modular buildings to make all-day K possible for Mountain, South Poplar and King elementaries.

A year ago the provincial government announced the province would be moving toward full-day kindergarten for all five-year-olds, committing \$280 million over three school years for its implementation.

The government also announced in June another \$144 million to buy 133 modular classrooms, build additions to 21 schools, renovate others and reopen one school in Kelowna. By next September all 40,000 kindergarten-aged children will have access to the full-day program.

Meanwhile, much of the opposition to all-day K is focused on the additional loss of family time for the young participants.

The president of Kids First Parent Association of Canada, which promotes parental care over day care, said there's no reason to believe full-day kindergarten will improve the lives of children.

"If it's not broke, what are they trying to fix," Helen Ward was recently quoted as saying.

REAL Women of Canada says research from the United Kingdom shows in a comparison of almost 35,000 children there is no difference in their development levels. The organization also claims there's evidence all-day K could create negative social and emotional development.

This year parents have the option of crossing borders to have their child attend either a full-day or half-day program.

A ministry official said next year, parents who don't think their child is ready for full-day kindergarten can work out an alternative plan with their school's principal.

Parents are also not required to put their child in kindergarten, but when they enrol next year, a decision whether the student starts in kindergarten or Grade 1 will be made between parents, principals and teachers.

In addition to Harry Sayers elementary, all-day kindergarten will be provided in the 2010-11 school year at: Aberdeen, Alexander, Blue Jay, Centennial, Clearbrook, Dave Kandal, Dormick Park, Dr. Roberta Bondar, Godson, Jackson, John Maclure, Margaret Stenersen, Matsqui, Ross, Sandy Hill, Ten-Broeck, Terry Fox and Upper Sumas.

The other 12 elementary schools will convert to all-day K in September 2011.