Learning as we grow:

Evaluation of the Pre-primary Program and Early Years Centres

Overall Report – Year 4 (2018)

March 6, 2019

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Introduction

In 2013, the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the Department) established a collaboration with the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation for the development and implementation of Early Years Centres in Nova Scotia. The Early Years Centres brought together existing programs and services that support young children and their families within a public school setting, while also providing greater access to early childhood education for preschool children. The introduction of the Early Years Centres represents a joint effort of the Department and the Regional Centres for Education (RCEs) and the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP)[1], in collaboration with community partners, service providers and families. The vision for Early Years Centres in Nova Scotia is that over time, as the integration and collaboration of key service providers become well developed and as programs and services become more aligned, families will have seamless access to the services they need, when they need them.

The Early Years Centre model builds on similar work across the country with a similar vision of seamless access (Corter, Janmohamed, & Pelletier, 2012; Health and Education Research Group, 2013; Poon, Rowcliffe, Forer, Wiens, & Biferie, 2015). Previous research has shown that such integrated service delivery models have the potential to support families and child development (McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007; Patel, Corter, Pelletier, & Bertrand, 2016). The Toronto First Duty model was also based in school setting providing a model for implementation in Nova Scotia (Corter, Janmohamed, & Pelletier, 2012).

An evaluation team, comprising researchers from Dalhousie University's Healthy Populations Institute and Mount Saint Vincent University, was hired to monitor and assess the Early Years Centres as part of a comprehensive 5 year evaluation funded by the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation. The first 3 years of the evaluation documented the key accomplishments, enablers and challenges learned through the Early Years Centres and identified opportunities for further action. One key area of success for the Early Years Centres was the play-based, no-fee, Early Learning Program for children . The program was universally available to all children in the year before entering school within the school catchment. Programs were facilitated by qualified Early Childhood Educators, and took place within the school setting which provided opportunities for partnership and participation in school-wide activities and events.

Starting in September 2017, the Department launched a provincial Pre-primary Program, which builds on the earlier evaluation findings from Early Years Centres and is further supported by research suggesting positive learning impacts from attending early learning programs the year before they enter school (Campbell & Ramey, 1995; Reynolds, 1994, 1998; Sylva et al., 2010, Patel, 2009). The Pre-primary Program is a voluntary, play-based, no-fee program for children who will be age 4 by December 31 of a given school year, and who live within the catchment area of the elementary school that they will eventually attend. The program is currently held in 46 school communities throughout the 7 Regional Centres for Education and the CSAP. The existing Early Learning Programs within the Early Years Centres, along with other programs at the RCEs and CSAP (e.g., Early Learning Opportunities, Grandir en français) are being transitioned into the new Pre-primary Program model. Continued integration and collaboration of key service providers to support families was encouraged at the Early Years Centres.

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[1] On March 9, 2018 the Education Reform (2018) Act received Royal Assent which dissolved the former regional school boards, with the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP) remaining for francohpone schools.

To respond to the evolving policy landscape of early childhood in Nova Scotia, the evaluation team shifted focus to also encompass the Pre-primary Program in the Year 4 evaluation. A new project description and evaluation framework were prepared to reflect this progression of the evaluation. The Year 4 evaluation has been guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent do Early Years Centres and the Pre-primary Program reach their intended target population?
2. To what extent were Early Years Centres and the Pre-primary Program implemented as intended?
3. To what extent does the organizational structure support the implementation of the Early Years Centres and the Pre-primary Program?

Purpose of this report

This report summarizes all the data collected as part of the Year 4 evaluation. The results are presented to respond to the three evaluation questions.

What did we do?

Family Survey

An online survey was developed by the evaluation team to learn more about families' experiences with the Early Years Centres and the Pre-primary Program. The survey was informed by the Year 2 Early Years Centre family survey, a scan of the literature and contextual needs within Nova Scotia. The survey was available for completion online through a secure, university-based platform from May 3, 2018 to May 31, 2018. The online survey link was disseminated to the Pre-primary Program leads of the Regional Centres for Education and the CSAP, who further distributed the survey to 8 Early Years Centres and 38 Pre-primary Programs. Posters and leaflets were provided by the evaluation team for the Early Years Centres and Pre-primary Programs to distribute to families.

From the survey data collected, response frequencies and cross-tabulations were generated and explored. These findings are presented in a separate report.

Participation data

Attendance data were obtained from *PowerSchool* as recorded by Pre-primary Program Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) throughout the 2017 – 2018 school year. Raw scores for these attendance data, as well as children's ancestry information were provided to the evaluation team following the end of the school year by the Department. The evaluation team examined attendance, absences, and enrollment by region and across the province to help determine the generalizability of family survey data, and to inform analyses of case study data (see below).

Case studies

Four case study sites were selected in four different regions by the Department. Throughout the months of May and June, members of the evaluation team visited each site location, touring and taking pictures of the Pre-primary Program and school spaces, and conducting interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders.

Site visit (description of photos taken)

During site visits, a member of the evaluation team took photographs of various school and Pre-primary Program locations. These images were used to help inform later qualitative analysis of educators' and families' experiences. Following a collection guide, photographs were taken of Pre-primary spaces (e.g. drop-off spaces, classrooms, washrooms, food storage and preparation areas, documentation regarding the Nova Scotia Early Years Curriculum Framework and other provincial initiatives, program calendars), as well as general school spaces (e.g. outdoor play spaces and fields, playground structures, school gyms and libraries, gardens, cafeterias).

Focus groups and interviews (data collection + analysis)

To gather contextual information on each case study site, an interview took place with the Pre-primary Supervisors/Managers and Consultants from the Regional Centres for Education and the Department. The evaluation team also conducted multiple interviews and focus groups with early childhood educators (ECE), teachers, principals, families and community partners for each case study site. For the two Early Years Centres, a focus group was also conducted with the Site-Management Team. The participants were determined based on recommendations from key contacts in the school (e.g., lead ECE, principal or Pre-primary Supervisor/Manager). Appendix A provides an overview of the participants in the interviews and focus groups.

Each interview conducted was tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim by the research team. Participants were also encouraged to email further comments or concerns related to the Pre-primary Program implementation that they may have missed or were unable to express during the interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to create an understanding about how the Early Years Centres and Pre-primary Programs can be integrated into the existing school system to support children, families and care providers. Once the interviews were transcribed, the evaluation team employed a qualitative research approach to code the data for categories, themes, and patterns to respond to the 3 evaluation questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). During this process the evaluation team regularly met to discuss coding and emerging themes from the data.

ECERS-3

The Department conducted Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale version 3 (ECERS-3) assessments at each of the case study schools during the 2017-2018 year, and supplied this data to the evaluation team. This comprehensive assessment tool measures environmental factors as well as teacher-child interactions that affect the broad developmental needs of young children. The role of teacher-child and peer interactions are emphasized in creating an environment conducive to developmental gains.

The scale provides a Total Environment Rating Score as well as subscale scores in each of six areas: Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Literacy, Learning Activities, Interaction and Program Structure. Subscale scores are calculated by adding the related item scores and then dividing by the number of items scored in that particular subscale. Total Environment Rating Scores are calculated by adding the six subscale scores and then dividing by six.

Two trained ECERS-3 administrators visited the four case sites in May 2018 to conduct the ECERS-3 in the Pre-primary Program. Evaluations took place in the morning and lasted three hours. The reported scores correspond to the following scale: 1 (inadequate) 3 (minimal) 4 (adequate) 5 (good) 7 (excellent). 2 of the 35 items within the ECERS-3 can be scored as not applicable; item 27 and 35. Refer to Appendix B for a full list of the 35 items. Case site 2 and 3 received 2 ECERS-3 scores since each case site had 2 learning environments. The Total Environment Rating Score and subscale scores are presented as an average score, rather than individual scores. The baseline measure of the quality of the learning environment, from ECERS-3, provides a valid and reliable measure of program quality, and thus quality

experience for children. This data, along with ECERS-3 assessment from previous years provides information about the quality of the Pre-primary Program at each of the schools.

What did we find?

Our evaluation questions can be considered through an ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) where a child's development is influenced by the different systems and environments to which they are exposed. Figure 1 provides an overview of the various systems that may influence child development, including close interactions of the family and within the EYCs and Pre-primary Program at a microsystems level, within specific social structures and policies at the exosystem level and broader societal and cultural influences at the macrosystem level. The results are presented to correspond to these levels of influence: 1) the microsystems of young children and their families; 2) the microsystems of EYCs and Pre-primary Programs; and 3) the exosystem and macrosystem policies and structures.
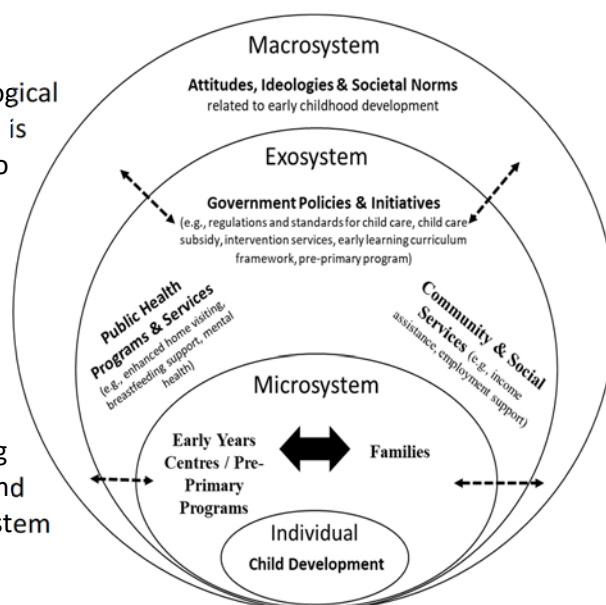

Figure 1. Conceptual framing for the impact on child development

To what extent does the organizational structure support the implementation of the Early Years Centres and Pre-primary Program?

The Pre-primary Program is designed to be an inclusive, safe and accommodating program, easily accessible to parents in the school community. The purpose of the Pre-primary Program is to provide a high-quality, early childhood education environment for four-year-olds while also supporting familial engagement. The program was established to facilitate learning during the early years and to do so in a safe and caring, play-based environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of all children. This program is intended to give children the opportunity to experience learning through play, further assisting those children with the transition into Primary. The Pre-primary Program follows Capable, Confident and Curious: Nova Scotia's Early Learning Curriculum Framework, which describes a play-based approach to early learning. The play-based approach believes that children are "competent learners" (p.49) and that play provides the context in which children learn (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2018). Following this curriculum, the Pre-primary Program educators are encouraged to provide a combination of child-led and -initiated learning combined with educator-led and –supported learning.

The Pre-primary Programs are staffed by one lead ECE and support ECEs; these ECEs are supervised and supported by Pre-primary Program Supervisors/Managers and consultants that work for the Regional Centre for Education or CSAP and the Department. School principals do not supervise the ECEs but are responsible for the school building, which includes ensuring safety and security, addressing operational issues, and welcoming families into the school community. The principals at the four case study schools spoke about navigating this new role as they are not the formal supervisors of the ECEs and most wanted to find ways to support the Pre-primary Program to connect with the school.
 Through the evaluation we learned that the ECEs had the opportunity to take part in a variety of professional development opportunities (Appendix C). Provincial-wide professional development was offered in October 2017 to lead and support ECEs, which focused on the vision for the Pre-primary Program and play-based learning. Other opportunities were offered on a regional basis and included a variety of topics, such as observation/documentation, loose parts and outdoor play, behaviour,

pedagogical leadership, routine-based intervention, etc. Most sites offered this professional development to both lead and support ECEs.

> "We also provide here, as a group we provide training and professional development opportunities to the ECEs. If the ECEs need support in communicating with families or if there are any kind of issues going on, I support in that." [Supervisor/Manager]

To what extent were Early Years Centres and Pre-primary Program implemented as intended?

The implementation is described through the experiences of the four case study sites. The sites were selected to ensure diversity of experience with the Pre-primary Program, including school size, community characteristics, geography and prior school-based early learning program. Appendix D provides a summary of the contextual features of the case sites.

ECERS-3 Scores

The Average Total Environment Rating Scores for each case site are presented in Figure 2. Total Environment Rating Score and subscale scores for case sites 2 & 3 are an aggregated score, representing 1 score for both classrooms at each case site.

The average Total Environment Rating Score across the four case sites was adequate (4). Site 2 (4.76) and Site 3 (4.62) received a score near good. Site 4 (3.76) was near adequate and site 1 (2.85) was near minimal.

Figure 2: Average Total Environment Rating Score across All Sites, 2018
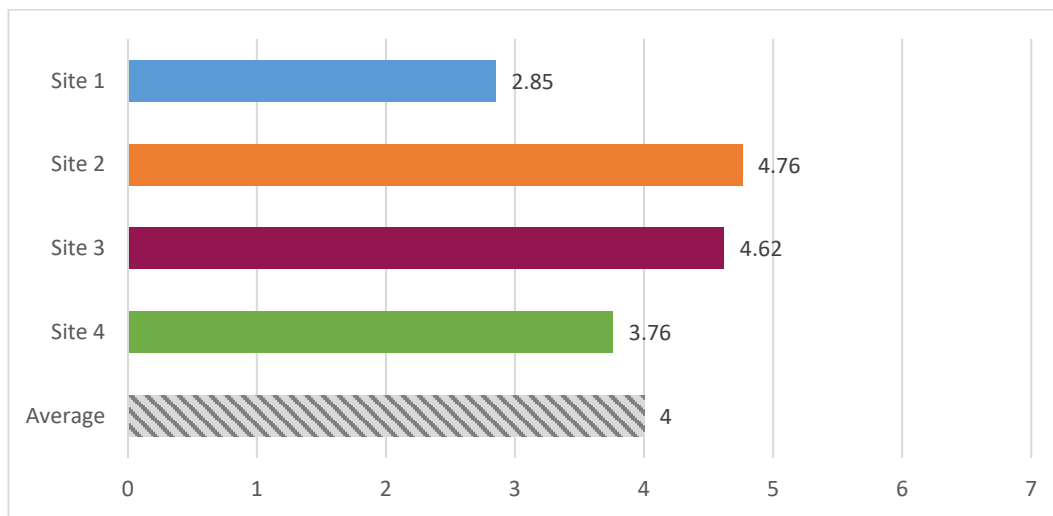
Figure 3 illustrates the aggregated Total Environment Rating Scores from 2015-2018. Average Total Environment Rating Scores for 2015 (average 4.31 across four EYC sites), 2016 (average 4.32 across eight EYC sites), and 2018 (average 4.00 across the four case study sites) were adequate whereas the average Total Environment Rating Score for 2017 (average 4.93 across eight EYC sites) was good. This provides an opportunity to observe the improved ratings over the first three years of the EYCs, suggesting a potential path toward future improved results in subsequent years of the Pre-primary Program.

Figure 3: Average Total Environment Rating Score, 2015-2018
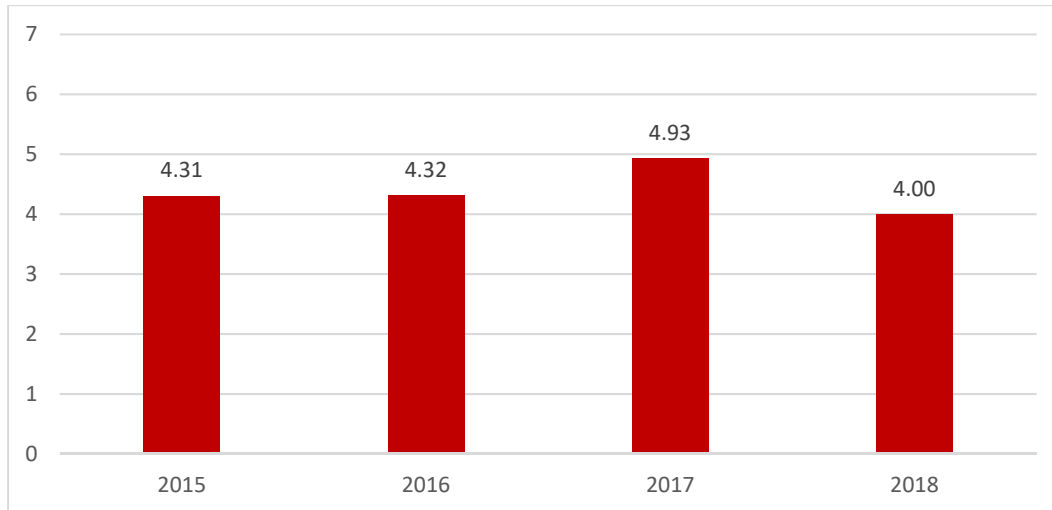
Pre-primary Program Implementation

Below is a description of the implementation through the daily programming, school space, school connections and community partnerships of the four case sites.

Daily Programming

Routine. Across the four case sites, the hours of operation of the Pre-primary Program were similar to the host schools and typically ran about six hours in length. The Pre-primary Programs generally started their day at the same time as the remaining students in the school and some ended slightly earlier. The majority of children in the Pre-primary Program were dropped off directly into the classroom; however, at one case site, children were dropped off outside. In most cases, ECEs touched base with at least one family member during drop off and/or pick up:

> "So (ECE name) my co-teacher is at the meeting spot, and I'm at the door greeting all of the parents as they walk through the door. Getting information cause sometimes you know, things could happen in the middle of the night or in the morning, and so that's a great opportunity for me to know all of that, and then I write it down in the log book." [ECE]

Some case sites offered the option for parents to text or post on their private Facebook group where ECEs could respond. However, communication with parents was sometimes noted as a challenge for some ECEs. Particular challenges to communication were described in programs where parents did not directly come into the classroom or if their child came with other adults.

> "In the beginning, it was really difficult cause a lot of the families weren't dropping in my classroom I shouldn't say the other classroom but in my classroom my families weren't dropping them off. It was either siblings, grandparents, who were using scooters and things like that who couldn't get into the building so they would wait till they get in and the children just knew where to go? So that was really difficult because I never had that conversation and then finding out they didn't have cellphones. Which was something that I just took for granted, or emails. Parents don't check email so, that was something that was very different." [ECE]

The sequence of activities in the Pre-primary Programs was fairly similar across the four case sites. Typically, upon arrival, children would engage in a period of play before snack was provided. In one case site, children spent a period of time outdoors before coming in for snack. Parents from this school indicated that it was easier to drop their child off outside instead of bumping into parents and other children inside. Outdoor play among the case sites generally followed morning snack with the exception of one case site where the children engaged in indoor free play instead. Following lunch, a period of quiet time typically took place. During these quiet times children who wanted to rest could, and the children who did not were able to read books and engage in quiet activities such as puzzles. Two case sites indicated that a quiet period was not functional for the children they had this year, therefore they engaged in free play after lunch instead. Following quiet time, children engaged in additional free play. To end the day, all case sites spent the remaining time allotted for the program outdoors. Children were then picked up by parents or other adults outside on the outdoor play space designated to the Pre-primary Program.

Two case sites described how they went about planning their activities for the day. One case site indicated that all ECEs participate in the planning of activities in the morning before children arrive. Another case site indicated that at the end of the day, the teaching partners sit down and discuss the day, create documentation, and plan for the next day.

> *"Every day at the end of the day we're ab— usually we're able to get together and at least discuss a little bit about what they were interest in, we— we document that and we also then develop what we can do to add on that the next day so, we have a bit of a plan in place as to what that—you know what they might be interested in and what— what they'd like to further that with." [ECE]*

Food. Families are responsible for providing their child(ren) with lunches, however two snacks are to be provided by the Pre-primary Program. The provision and preparation of these snacks follows the Nova Scotia Manual for Food and Nutrition in Regulated Child Care Settings (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011). In most case sites, the lead ECEs would procure the food and with the help of the support ECEs, prepare snacks. One site indicated that they had a partnership with the Life Skills high school class where those students would purchase the food for the Pre-primary Program. Snacks and lunch delivery are to follow open snack and family style meal practices. Open snack involves a "buffet style", encouraging children to take lead on what and how much food they eat, following their own hunger cues. The family style meal involves the children and ECEs eating together during lunch, supporting social-emotional learning and language and literacy skills through meal-time conversations. The open snack model was used in all case sites allowing children to choose when and how much to eat. Mimicking the school structure, lunch typically occurred around the same time as the rest of the school. Lunches were provided by families, with the exception of two case sites where children could order lunch from the cafeteria. A family style dining approach to lunchtime took place in all case sites. For some sites, snack was challenging to fit into their afternoon routine due to the fact that there was a short frame of time between children eating lunch and children going home for the day. In some case sites, afternoon snack was incorporated into lunch to either supplement the lunches children had brought or to increase the amount of time for outdoor play.

> *"It really looks different with regards to snacks that are provided at some sites they're providing the two snacks a day and at some sites they're providing that second snack during lunch time. Because they've found that what children are bringing in their lunch is very minimal and it kind of will create a level playing field for all children who—who are*

having difficulty accessing food through their family. We have one site that is—is providing food for children who aren't able to come with it, based on family need." [Supervisor/Manager]

Play-Based Learning.

The Pre-primary Programs followed the principle of play-based learning in adherence with the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2018). At one of the school sites the ECEs developed a video for families to explain how the play-based learning is critical for children's development and what their child will be learning throughout the year. Participants across the case sites commented about the importance of the play-based learning and its impact on children's development. However, despite the positive remarks towards a play-based learning from many, some stakeholders expressed feeling concerned that the focus on play would not be academic-oriented enough and/or structured enough to fully support children's development and their transition to Grade Primary.

Support for play-based learning	Concern about play-based learning
"They have provided a warm, caring, environment that has allowed my child to grow her social -emotional, peer relationships and problem-solving skills, as well as learned primary readiness skills through a play based program that is self driven and interest based." [Family] *"Yeah cause I know say—I've heard other parents say well where it is play-based I don't feel like my child would benefit from it because they you know already knew all that kind of stuff but it's so much more than when you think of play-based it's not just playing ya know? They learn so much…"* [Family] *"while she may not see herself as learning a whole lot she's playing games but they're singing songs which are teaching they're— they're doing a lot of, ch—other games that— that have teaching elements to them that are well-disguised, so she doesn't see herself as learning, when she clearly is."* [Family]	*"From— from— from my perspective we were kinda [sic[2]] structured home. We— we've been teaching the ABC's, we've been doing a lot of things with them, and from what I'm discovering I ask her everyday "what did you learn today" nothing, right. The structure is not there. Like the teachers are great, but the teachers tell me that they're not allowed to teacher ABC's, they can't teach them numbers, they c— they're very restricted as to what they can do and I— I can see that starting out but they should be able to gradually start bringing in some structure in there."* [Family] *"I would like to see more practice with writing skills, example learning how to write their name"* [Family] *"I understand it is a play based learning environment, but incorporating more of the basics such as number/ letter recognition, tracing name may be beneficial"* [Family]

School Spaces

All case sites had two classrooms except one. As well as the one ECE for every 10 children in the classroom, three out of the four case sites had an additional support ECE to assist in programming. The Pre-primary Program classrooms were located adjacent to the Primary classrooms in all but one case

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[2] During the transcription process, if a participant makes a grammatical error when speaking, '[sic]' is typed immediately after the error to indicate it was actually what the participant said rather than an error in transcription.

site. The remaining case site classrooms were located across a foyer, separate from the grade level classrooms.

The Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework acknowledges that the indoor environment is not the sole context in which learning occurs and that the outdoor environment offers unique features (i.e. mud, plants) and promotes different behaviours (i.e. risk-taking, exploration) that contribute to children's learning (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2018). Two types of outdoor play spaces were observed in the case study sites. Two case sites had outdoor play spaces that they shared with the onsite child care centre. These outdoor play spaces consisted of play structures designed for young children. One case site indicated that although the play structures were available, their children did not use them very often. Furthermore, the time allotted for the Pre-primary Program children was limited as they shared the space.

> *"I will be very honest we have two play structure [sic], I observe one whole day how many minutes the kids play on that structure and if I counted six minutes." [ECE]*

The other two case sites indicated that they were not permitted to use the outdoor play structures as the play structures are designed for school aged children (5-12 years of age).
However, this did not seem to limit outdoor play as the broader play space incorporated natural material and loose parts.

> *"I personally don't mind not having the swings because I find... that the children play, much more creatively without the swings but it would be nice to have some more— some natural trees... some natural hills, some natural... climbing thing like, more loose parts." [ECE]*

As well as the outdoor space, the four case sites also indicated that they shared multiple spaces with the school. All case sites used the gymnasium in the host school and most sites used a sensory room with some others using the music room and library.

School Connections

Three of four case study sites had a previous early learning program as an Early Years Centre or through the Early Learning Opportunities program. The school connections seemed to be influenced by these prior programs, with the existing programs having more connections with the rest of the school. In these cases, the Pre-primary Program was very well connected with the school, invited to staff meetings and events; some participants in these schools did note further opportunities to enhance connections.

> *"And our pre-primary classes are very involved with our school, so they go through the building, they go to the music room, they go to the library, they see their brothers and sisters you know as they go through the hallway that kind of thing and also my mind set when it first came here with the [previous early childhood program] was that they are part of our school.." [Principal]*

In the one case site without a previous program, the connection between the Pre-primary Program and the rest of the school was not very strong. Participants commented on the poor communication with the rest of the school. ECEs indicated that this made them feel unwelcome and disconnected to the school.

> *"I've been here since October and I don't feel like one person in the building other than the people in our room have built relationship with me. The [one subject] teacher, that's*

the only relationship I've built like, that's it I'm sure most of them don't know my name like there's no relationship building in my opinion." [ECE]

Community Partnerships

Various partnerships between the Pre-primary Program and the community were mentioned. In the two case sites with the EYCs, the evaluation team had the opportunity to talk to the site management team, which provided an opportunity to learn about the partnerships that have been developing over the last few years. Each site management team indicated that they were having regular meetings. EYCs identified community partnerships with a family resource centre within the host school or Mental Health and Addiction Services. The family resource centre offered programs for families and their children such as pre-natal programs, book exchanges, and cooking classes. Mental Health and Addiction Services provided a program for families and their children to share a meal together as well as learn healthy coping skills. Other partnerships that EYCs indicated were through Public Health, Dalhousie School of Nursing, various community organizations, as well as the Tri-County Early Years Partnership.

All case sites used the services available to them through Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention Program (EIBI) and Nova Scotia Early Childhood Development Intervention Services (NSECDIS).

> *"For children who have special needs we work very closely with Developmental Interventionists and like our— the team from Nova Scotia Early Childhood Development Intervention Services down here, is absolutely amazing and they work great with us and just very open with us. We know all of our Developmental Interventionists. They come right into our Pre-primary's and support, and they are very willing to— to communicate with our ECEs an— and share ideas and work together as a team to support children who have different abilities." [Supervisor/Manager]*

Most case sites indicated that they received hearing and/or speech services from Nova Scotia Hearing and Speech. Two case sites specified a partnership with family/community resource centres within the host school or nearby in the community which have built the sense of community within the school.

> *"So it's really built that sense of community. So now you've got the kids coming in the school but the parents are coming with them." [Site Management Team]*

Onsite full-day child care was offered in one EYC as well as an option for before/afterschool care for children attending the Pre-primary Program. Another EYC offered onsite before/afterschool care, which was available to the Pre-primary Program children, through a partnership with a community organization. Parents indicated that the before/after school care being available influenced their choice to attend the Pre-primary Program.

> *"If they didn't have daycare here we would not be in the program we probably I don't know what we'd do. So the early years is definitely like a savior for us." [Family]*

Before/after school care was also offered offsite in one Pre-primary Program through a couple of community organizations; children would be picked up at the school from the designated centre.

To what extent do Early Years Centres and Pre-primary Program reach young children and their families?

Enrollment and attendance in the Pre-primary Program

Enrollment and attendance data for the 2017 – 2018 year were received through PowerSchool from the Department on August 3rd, 2018. Attendance data were updated as of July 11th, 2018. Overall, a total of 896 children were enrolled in the Pre-primary Program3. Comparing the school-level Grade Primary (2018-19) enrollment to the Pre-primary Program (2017-18) enrollment, about 60% of eligible children attended the Pre-primary Program. Families' experiences with the Pre-primary Program.

A total of 295 families took part in the online survey (representing 33% of children enrolled) and 27 took part in a focus group across the four case study sites. The majority of family survey respondents indicated that their child was cared for by either themselves or a family member before attending the Pre-primary Program (57%) and that their child would have received care from themselves or a family member had they not attended the Pre-primary Program this year (57%). When asked about making the decision to register their child in the Pre-primary Program, the majority of family survey respondents indicated many factors as 'very important', including the expectation of good quality (90%), wanting their child to be ready for school (84%), feeling welcomed at the school (76%), and having the program located at the school (73%). Also indicated as 'very important' were the factors of convenient location (67%), having the program offered daily (59%), reducing the cost of childcare (44%), and having the program fit well with their work schedule (43%). The only factor the majority of respondents had not indicated as very important was whether or not they had another child attending the same school, with 47% having indicated that this was not important.

Through focus groups/interviews and the survey, data was collected that indicated how the Early Years Centres and the Pre-primary Program supported families and their children, as well as where improvements may be required. The majority of families who responded to the survey indicated with strong agreement that they were happy with the quality of the programs and services at the Early Years Centre and indicated that their family benefited from these. In regards to the Pre-primary Program, the majority of survey respondents indicated with strong agreement that they would send another child to the Pre-primary Program and that they would recommend the program to family/friends. Themes emerging related to families' experiences with the Early Years Centres and Pre-primary Program included: transportation and before/after school care, finances, support from ECEs, and supporting parenting and family life.

Transportation and Before/After School Care

Transportation and before and after school care were both services that were only provided at select Pre-primary Program sites. Only one site out of the four case sites provided bus transportation for Pre-primary Program children and the parents from this particular site voiced how influential the bus system was as it was able to accommodate many working families. Families from both the focus groups and survey who attended sites without this accommodation expressed concerns surrounding transportation to and from the Pre-primary Program and a desire for their child(ren) to be able to use the bus. In some cases, lack of bus access was a barrier to attending the Pre-primary Program every day. Often coinciding with transportation was the indicated desire for before and after school care. Many families from both the focus groups and survey indicated that before and after school care would be beneficial in accommodating their families, as expressed in the following quotes:

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[3] This number was verified in PowerSchool by last day of attendance in the Pre-primary Program on June 30 2018.

> *"Transportation has been an issue for us at times throughout the program, and it would be nice if the children would have the same opportunity to travel on the school bus to and from the school, as other children in similar programs are able to do. Also, if the transportation issue is unable to be fixed, an extended day or a program they could attend afterwards at the school would be helpful for those of us who work until 5pm and have to find a way to have our children picked up by 2pm."* [Family]

> *"The implementation of an after program care would be a huge asset for the average working class citizen. Most working class families have both parents in the work force and are not able to drop a child off to the program at 8am and pick up at 1:50pm. Without the help of a close family friend, I would not have been able to have utilize this wonderful program for my child and that would have been at our daughter's loss."* [Family]

Although not available in every Pre-primary Program site, before and after school care was available at some sites through partnerships with community organizations. Some of the families who took advantage of the before and after school care described how useful this was:

> *"It was real nice to have that period of time during the day time to have him being looked after by people that you know are going to be able to take care of him and then right into the afterschool program and it works out perfect."* [Family]

Finances.

The Pre-primary Program was often indicated by families through the focus groups and survey to support them financially. Many families described the program as being a relief as it was free so they no longer had to pay for regulated childcare. Other families explained that they were unable to afford childcare before the Pre-primary Program, having stayed home to care for their child instead. This program supported these families by providing them a free place for their child to receive early childhood education.

> *"As a stay at home mom with very low income the Pre Primary Program gave us an option that otherwise we would not be able to afford."* [Family]

For sites that did provide them, bus transportation and before and after school care was also indicated to have played a role in financially supporting families.

> *"She can go on the bus which saves travel costs for our family."* [Family]

For families attending Pre-primary Program sites that did not have access to transportation and/or before and after school care, this gap in services was sometimes indicated throughout the survey to create a financial strain.

> *"Transportation is a really big concern. Living in a rural area the school is far away. The cost in gas is too much to be affordable every day."* [Family]

Support from ECEs.

Many focus group and survey participants mentioned how the ECEs support their families through communication and making them feel comfortable. The majority of survey respondents indicated with strong agreement that the ECEs keep them informed about their child's progress (74%) and that they feel comfortable talking to the ECEs (82%). Common methods of communication include Facebook or other online groups in which ECEs can share pictures and information, documentation posted in the Pre-

primary Program classroom or school hallways, and direct communication between the ECEs and the parents at the beginning and/or end of the day. Some educators even have work phones so they are able to send texts and pictures to parents, keeping an open line of communication. These communication methods allow parents to feel more comfortable and secure with where their child is and what they are doing. Along with ECEs communicating information to parents about their children, the majority of survey respondents who identified their Pre-primary Program site as being within an Early Years Centre strongly agreed that the ECEs also communicate with them about other programs/services available through the EYC. At one of the case sites, the ECEs took it upon themselves to meet with the parents who enrolled their children before the school year began. Families were able to voice their concerns of their child's needs to the ECEs and this process seemed to help them become comfortable with their child attending the Pre-primary Program.

> *"We have a great relationship with the Pre-primary educators they always keep us informed about how his day went and tell us what adventures they went on or what he learned about that day. They have always made us feel like we could communicate with them from the beginning and straight through the program"* [Family]

> *"Uh yeah it's really good I'm comfortable like you said comfortable letting them go and comfortable talking to them if you have any issues they're really good that way if you need to talk to them about anything."* [Family]

> *"They are always willing to listen to my concerns and will answer any questions that I may have. If they are not able to answer right away. They will try to find the answer."* [Family]

The majority of survey respondents also indicated with strong agreement that the ECEs are good at teaching their child(ren) and indicated with agreement that the ECEs show interest in their child(ren). Through the focus groups, families discussed the various ways in which they feel the ECEs have been effective in supporting their children.

> *"They—they seem to know their kids in their classroom they seem to know their personalities what triggers"* [Family]

> *"Her teachers _____ (ECE name) and _____ (ECE name) are amazing and have given her such an amazing introduction into her academic beginnings. They are loving, compassionate and well educated in all fields to deal with children."* [Family]

> *"They have taken the time to notice things about _____ (child's name) in order to expand his world and teach him new things in ways I would have never thought of on my own."* [Family]

Although many families expressed strong communication with the ECEs, some did express a desire for more communication. Some families indicated that they would like to know more about what their child on a daily basis at the Pre-primary Program, and that they struggle to get this information as the ECEs are often busy during pick-up and drop-off times.

> *"I personally would like more information from the pre-primary educators on how my child is developing and interacting with the other children."* [Family]

> *"Yeah and it was like you know when we first did the meet and the first month where the class was small and before they doubled it there, I felt like I could communicate with the teachers a lot*

better in that beginning part and I was getting a lot more information and a lot more like troubleshooting on what was going on with _____ (child's name) and then when the class doubled it was like you had to fight [laughter]…" [Family]

An additional concern surrounding communication became apparent at one of the sites did not openly allow families to visit the classroom, which meant that families were unable to see the classroom and the various activities their child was doing throughout the day. This was acknowledged by families, ECEs and other community partners in this school. These families from this school also said that although they feel supported by the ECEs they did not feel welcome in the school. As previously mentioned, it is important to note that this was the one case study school that did not have a prior early learning program at the school before the introduction of the Pre-primary Program.

"but they're not feeling that the communication— basically because the way the school is set up, the children arrive and they greet them at the door so the parents aren't walking them to the classroom. So that's a change for these parents who are used to going to pre-school or daycare with their child. So that kind of has, limited the communication a bit." [Community Partner]

Supporting parenting and family life.

Families attending an Early Years Centre have access to additional services and programs (i.e. individual services for children, group programs for adults and children) which were discussed throughout the focus groups/interviews and the survey. Many survey respondents indicated that they feel their Early Years Centre is doing well at making parents feel valued and connected, as well as helping them to feel supported and knowledgeable about their child's learning and growth.

The majority of families that completed the survey indicated that they enjoy and are happy with the quality of the Early Years Centre programs/services. Although most families who responded to the survey indicated that nothing prevents them from attending the Early Years Centre programs and services, some families did indicate that more flexible times for various programs would allow for greater participation in the other services and programs at the Early Years Centre. These Early Years Centre services/programs were further discussed in detail during focus groups with families and site management teams.

"And we didn't talk about the _____ (Community Organization Name) but I would have to say the _____ (Community Organization Name) is fantastic for— especially even like pre-natal moms having programs and activities going on up to moms with children. Like a lot of the kids that we have are the same kids that go to daycare together and to preschool so they've got to know each other a head of time and just nice post-partum time after they have the baby that there's always somewhere to go and something regular every day and I could speak for, like the different activities like there's a cooking class that takes part..." [Family]

"And talking about food we do have a program at _____ (community organization name). _____ (community organization name), for family from three- to six-years-old and we're doing a—it's a—a little a—little recipes we're doing together, with the children and the family I guide them and they do have a recipe book at the end of the six week—four to six week, program." [Site-Management Team]

> *"It's a program that provides families with, a group family night we provide supper and they come in and they do like a family—a family group session and as well as a parent session and the child youth session where they just work on things like communication anger management, peer pressure, addictions and, other substance abuse situations."* [Site-Management Team]

For those families who did not attend an Early Years Centre, the Pre-primary Program was also reported to support parenting and family life. The majority of survey respondents indicated that they feel more ready as a parent, they have learned ways to help their child(ren) learn and grow, and they feel more comfortable at the school since having their child attend the Pre-primary Program. Overall, the majority of respondents indicated with strong agreement or agreement that the Pre-primary Program has provided them with extra support in raising their family.

> *"It has helped us communicate better with my daughter, it has taught us how to deal with different situations & it makes us feel better about the future in helping _____ (child's name)."* [Family]

Supporting Children

Responses from focus groups/interviews and the survey also indicated that families feel the Early Years Centres and the Pre-primary Program support their children. The majority of family survey respondents indicated with strong agreement that their child(ren) have benefited from the various services/programs at the Early Years Centre, that their child(ren) enjoys attending the Pre-primary Program, and that the Pre-primary Program has supported their child's development. Participants from various focus groups/interviews and the survey further emphasized *enhanced social-emotional development* (i.e. social skills, coping strategies) and language development, and increases in children's confidence since their child's enrollment in the Pre-primary Program. Many families also expressed that they thought their *child would be more prepared moving forward into Grade Primary* as a result of attending the Pre-primary Program. This perspective was also shared by some other stakeholders, including principals and community partners.

> *"Well... [pause] I guess just to see how smoothly the program actually runs. My focus for the, past 15 years has not been at the elementary level. And to actually see the play-based learning, working. Um... ya [sic] know and see these children actually developing social skills and learning to interact with one another. I think they're coming into the school better prepared, knowing their routines and some of the expectations."* [Principal]

> *"My daughter looks forward to going every day. She has made many friends and has gained insurmountable confidence in who she is."* [Family]

> *"Really the whole point of Pre-primary they're coming and they're— they're getting a taste of what schools going to be. So they're already getting the location they know where the cafeterias gonna [sic] be, they know how to sit in the cafeteria, and it helps the staff out."* [Family]

> *"I really don't believe that _____ (child's name) would've been ready to go in Primary if it wasn't for this—for this program."* [Family]

> *"I think that the program is designed to help them become ready right it's a very gentle transition into school"* [Family]

Participants also talked about the *diverse needs of children* in the Pre-primary Program. Some participants noted that the play-based learning approach accommodated for diverse learning needs by allowing children to follow their own lead and explore based on their own interests.

> *"Seeing that the children have choices we do centers so the children can rotate but learn at their own pace cause [sic] each child does not learn the same and we have to consider each individual child has their own special need not just those who have special need but each child has a special need."* [ECE]

> *"It fostered a lot of independence in the children and especially in _____ (Child's Name)… For a 4/5 year old child with Down Syndrome to gain independence, confidence, and gain social skills and learn French words and some receptive language it is pretty amazing. The quality of the programming and your fantastic teaching and leadership is wonderful."* [Family]

Diverse needs requiring a variety of services and supports were identified across the sites and through survey responses. These ranged from shyness, anxiety, challenging behaviors and language difficulties, to specific social and learning needs associated with conditions such as Autism and Down Syndrome. Parents indicated that having the flexibility for their child to attend as much as they needed is helpful in allowing the child to be a part of the program and receive those benefits, but also to do what works best for them and their child. Children with diverse needs received various services throughout the school year. Services such as EIBI and NSECDIS were utilized to help support children and their families in the Pre-primary Program. Staff from EIBI and NSECDIS frequently were present in the Pre-primary Classroom working directly with children and ECEs. Although ECEs have received supports from community partnerships in most cases, some ECEs indicated that they still need more supports to fully assist the children with diverse needs in their early learning environments. Likewise, ECEs and Principals expressed their desire to have Pre-primary Program children and ECEs able to access supports already within the host schools (i.e. learning centres).

> *"(Lead ECE): I [sigh] honestly I feel like, we need more support in, helping _____ (Child's name), because we're not completely trained in it.*

> *(Support ECE): And the help is right next door. Like— like the learning center, like the speech."* [ECE]

Ratio was expressed as being a challenge in terms of trying to fully assist each child as the number of children with diverse needs is greater than the number of ECEs present in many early learning environments. Furthermore, families who responded to the survey expressed concern since their children who accessed EIBI services in the Pre-primary Program could not continue this service through to Grade Primary.

> *"My child is not ready for primary... he is only 4 years old until the end of November, he is severely autistic, non verbal and not potty trained, and will only be half way thru his year of intense therapy with EIBI (a program designed to prepare him for school) yet they are forcing him to move on to primary... its outrageous. he can repeat primary as many years as I want but can't get 4 extra months in pre primary."* [Family]

Similarly, within another Site Management Team focus group, concern was noted surrounding EIBI services not being available in Grade Primary as well as not being offered in French for their Francophone school.

> *"EIBI why you would stop the services when the child gets to Primary is beyond me! Like, if they have that need and you have a program that's developed and statistics show that it works, why would you stop because the child goes to another room? Cause, let's get real that's exactly*

what's happening it's only what a hundred feet away? And we're putting families through that much stress? I don't get it." [Site-Management Team]

"And I think that (Site 1) situated in _____ (Community Name), has been known since day one to be an Acadian community, not having an ac—French language, designation? And that EIBI is being—my [children] here are being served in English? Where if they were in _____ (Community Name) or _____ (Community Name) they'd be served in French or in _____ (Community Name)? This is ridiculous! Like I don't even know why this is an issue. I was shocked!" [Site-Management Team]

Another indicated concern was around children being immersed in a second language within the learning environment. This was indicated to occur with children who were new to the region (i.e. immigrant) or due to need to support language acquisition during the Pre-primary Program when children spoke a different language at home. ECEs expressed that trying to support the children in these situations was difficult at times since they could not communicate effectively.

Moving forward

The introduction of the Pre-primary Program is a change to the public school system in Nova Scotia. Using an ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) allows consideration of the broader system and the interrelationships that are tied together by organizational structures, processes and contexts across schools (Best et al., 2009). Building an understanding of the systemic change process is critically important to inform future implementation of the program (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010).

The ***play-based and child directed learning*** philosophy in the Pre-primary Program is a shift for the public school system. There seemed to be a lack of understanding surrounding the play-based learning approach of the program, particularly in the case site that did not have a prior early learning program. This, along with the quick implementation of the Pre-primary Program, seemed to influence the acceptance and integration of the Pre-primary Program into the rest of the school.

Alongside greater understanding of play-based learning for the school community, ***ECEs will benefit from ongoing support*** to foster play-based learning in Pre-primary Programs. Board Leads and the Department Consultants should continue to provide guidance, mentorship, and support to ECEs to further strengthen ECEs understanding of the play-based learning approach and different aspects of the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework to support the diverse needs of children and families. Opportunities for ECEs to communicate with ECEs from different Pre-primary Program could also help to share experiences and expertise. Ongoing training would assist ECEs to better articulate the benefits of a play-based learning approach to parents and other stakeholders.

The ***expectations of the program*** and the ***responsibilities of school administration*** appeared unclear in some cases which may have led to negative attitudes or opinions towards the program due to the limited information and time to prepare for the transition. Although three of the four case sites had some form of the early learning program prior to the introduction of the Pre-primary Program, there still seemed to be uncertainty of what to expect of the program. For example, some parents had expected the program to follow a more academic-oriented approach. Furthermore, some stakeholders felt that misconceptions about the program were due to limited information due to the quick implementation of the program. There also seemed to be some confusion on the role of the principal, in relation to the Pre-primary Program Supervisor/Manager and the Department consultants, especially to address immediate concerns from the ECEs.

Finally, it was evident that ***school climate matters*** in the implementation of the Pre-primary Program. Previous research has suggested that the climate of a school can influence the receptivity of new initiatives and their success (Beets et al., 2008; Malloy et al., 2015). School climate represents the physical and social structures that shape a school's context and influenced by things like leadership, staff support, school connectedness, morale and stability, and financial and human resources (Parcel et al., 2003) Through data collected at the case sites, it was evident that school climate was important in connection of the Pre-primary Program with the rest of the school. A positive school climate was observed in three of four case sites through positive leadership, engagement of the ECEs in school-wide events and opportunities for the Pre-primary Program to utilize school spaces such as the gymnasium, music room, sensory room, and Grade Primary classrooms. Conversely, school climate appeared poor in one school with ECEs and families both expressing feelings of exclusion. There was also little opportunity for the Pre-primary Program to be connected with the rest of the school.

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Appendix A

Case Site Participant Summary

Case Site Summaries

Early Years Centres and Pre-primary
Program Evaluation 2018

Who did we talk to?

Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4
"The program is excellent!"	"They met every expectation."	"I would definitely recommend."	"It's a very gentle transition into school."

Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4
• Regional Pre-primary Program Lead • Department Consultant • Early Childhood Educators [3] • Parents [4] • Site Management Team (teachers, principal, regional staff, community partners) [9] • Regional Student Services Staff	• Regional Pre-primary Program Lead • Department Consultant • Early Childhood Educators [4] • Parents [7] • Site Management Team (teachers, principal, regional staff, community partners) [8] • Principal	• Regional Pre-primary Program Leads [2] • Department Consultant • Regional Facilitator for Literacy • Early Childhood Educators [4] • Parents [9] • Principal	• Regional Pre-primary Program lead • Department Consultant • Early Childhood Educators [4] • Parents [8] • Principal • Teachers [3] • Community Partners [3]

Total Number of participants: 72

Appendix B

List of ECERS 3 Subscale and Individual Items

ECERS-3 Subscale	Items	
Space and Furnishings	1. Indoor space 3. Room arrangement for play and learning 5. Child-related display 7. Gross motor equipment	2. Furnishings for care, play, and learning 4. Space for privacy 6. Space for gross motor play
Personal Care Routines	8. Meals/snacks 10. Health practices	9. Toileting/diapering 11. Safety practices
Language and Literacy	12. Helping children expand vocabulary 14. Staff use of books with children 16. Becoming familiar with print	13. Encouraging children to use language 15. Encouraging children's use of books
Learning Activities	17. Fine motor 19. Music and movement 21. Dramatic play 23. Math materials and activities 25. Understanding written numbers 27. Appropriate use of technology	18. Art 20. Blocks 22. Nature/science 24. Math in daily events 26. Promoting acceptance of diversity
Interaction	28. Supervision of gross motor 30. Staff-child interaction 32. Discipline	29. Individualized teaching and learning 31. Peer interaction
Program Structure	33. Transitions and waiting times 35. Whole-group activities for play and learning	34. Free play

Appendix C

Summary of Professional Development from regions with a Case Study site

Provincial

Topic of PD	Timing of PD	Participants
A Vision for Early Years Programs: Leading From Where You Stand	October 2017	Board Supervisors/Managers
Nova Scotia: Reflective Practice	October 2017	All lead & support ECEs across the Province
Embracing Play Based Learning: A Continuum of Practice	May 2018	All lead & support ECEs across the Province

Site 1

Topic of PD	Timing of PD	Participants
Observation/Pedagogical Documentation & Francisation	October 2017	Lead & support ECEs
Portfolios	October 2017	Lead & support ECEs
ABC's of Behaviour	April 2018	Lead & support ECEs
The Learning Environment	May 2018	Lead & support ECEs

Site 2

Topic of PD	Timing of PD	Participants
Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework, The Image of the Child, non-union benefits, and Networking	September 2017	Lead & support ECEs
Fall Conference	September 2017	Some attended
Problem Solving, Documentation, Technology, Networking, and Active start	November 2017	Lead & support ECEs
Loose Parts	November 2017	Lead & support ECEs
AESOP, Pre-primary Orientation, New Sites, and NSECDIS presenter	March 2018	Lead & support ECEs
How Outdoor Play Programming Sparks Children's Curiosity and Learning	May 2018	Some attended
NSCCA Conference: Exploring Risk in Outdoor Play	June 2018	Some attended

Site 3

Topic of PD	Timing of PD	Participants
The Power of you and Pedagogical Leadership (Implementation RBIP and AESOP)	December 2017	Lead ECEs
Pre-primary Documentation and Implementation	April 2018	Lead ECEs

Site 4

Topic of PD	Timing of PD	Participants
The Image of the Child: Creating a Shared Vision	November 2017	Lead & support ECEs
The Basics of Creating a Routine Based Intervention Plan	February 2018	Lead & support ECEs
Documentation: What, Why and How	March 2018	Lead & support ECEs
How Outdoor Play Programming Sparks Children's Curiosity and Learning	May 2018	Lead & support ECEs

Appendix D

Case study contextual information

	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4
# of Pre-primary Program children 2017-2018[4]	28	30	38	25
# of students registered for Grade Primary September 2018[5]	26	35	39	35
Percentage of Grade Primary students reached by the Pre-primary Program[6]	108%	86%	97%	71%
# of ECEs[7]	4 (1 lead, 3 support)	5 (2 lead, 3 support)	4 (2 lead, 2 support)	4 (1 lead, 3 support)
School grades[8]	P-12	P-6	P-6	P-4
Community characteristics[9]	Rural village	Rural town	Located in an inner-city community	Rural village, located outside town
Prior early childhood programs/services[10]	Early Years Centre (EYC)	Early Years Centre (EYC)	Early Learning Opportunities (ELO)	Early Years (2.5-hour program at the school once a week)
Percent of Population having low income[11]*	34.00%	37.00%	35.00%	34.00%
Percent of Population with Less than Grade 12 Education[12]*	28.28%	32.34%	16.67%	26.61%
Percent of Population who are Single Mothers[13]*	13.17%	18.75%	20.38%	17.95%
Public Housing Units[14]*	12	7	229	0

[4] Received from ECERS-3 Reports & ECE Interviews.

[5] Received from Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development as of January 5th, 2018.

[6] Received from Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development as of January 5th, 2018

[7] Received from Site Visit tours and pictures, & ECE Interviews.

[8] Received from School Websites.

[9] Received from Site Visit tours.

[10] Received from Supervisor/Coordinator, ECE, Site-Management Team, & Principal Interviews.

[11] Received from http://healthatlas.ca/ (Forward Sortation Area)

[12] Received from http://healthatlas.ca/ (Forward Sortation Area)

[13] Received from http://healthatlas.ca/ (Forward Sortation Area)

[14] Received from https://data.novascotia.ca/Community-Services/Public-Housing-Units-Nova-Scotia-Families/h9hq-4rua

Percent of Aboriginal population[15]*	1.79%	11.86%	1.79%	3.42%
Approximate values, exact percentage/value depends on school catchment				

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[15] Received from http://healthatlas.ca/ (Community Cluster)