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Expanding Public Education to Include Four-Year-Old Children

Common Concerns About Junior Kindergarten

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My neighborhood school is full and there is no space for the 4-year-olds.

Capacity is often a concern, especially in urban areas. Provinces have opted to phase it in over a couple of years to deal with capacity issues, starting in rural areas where ample space often exists. Some urban schools discover that they have more space than they initially realized by repurposing rooms currently used for other reasons. There are always a few schools where space is a challenge. For example, in NS a few schools used another nearby site before moving into the same school building. Some schools are using portable classrooms to address capacity issues. Those rooms can be customized for younger children, providing their own washrooms with quick access to the outside. (Evidently, portable classrooms are no longer what they used to be.) Every region with a JK program has successfully worked through the challenges of space.

Primary teachers are often not educated in play-based learning.

Primary teachers may have little instruction or experience in play-based learning. This is why bringing qualified ECE's into the K-12 environment is valuable. These professionals model effective play-based learning which primary teachers witness and begin to use themselves (e.g. children are now outside much more often). Principals assume leadership over JK and infuse it into the curriculum planning of the school. When primary teachers understand and practice play-based learning the long-term results are impressive.

What happens to my 4-year-old at 3:00? Child care keeps him until I finish work.

Parents need the same care for all of their children up to age 12. It is actually not an argument to keep the 4-year-olds out but to support the school in providing additional care. ON mandated schools to offer before- and after-school programs, either delivered by them or contracted to a provider. School becomes a one-stop-shop for all children. In NL's current model, a family with a 4-year-old and a 6-year-old have two completely different afterschool and summer programs. In a JK model they all stay at the school and the parents do not have to worry about it. More importantly, there are



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It will empty the childcare centers that we need open.

Pulling the 4-year-olds out of the childcare system frees significant space which, in every other jurisdiction, is instantly filled by desperate families. In regions that now enjoy public JK no child care centers closed. NS, ON, NWT, and QC still have wait lists, but they are now much more reasonable. The

Premier's mandate letter for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development directs that 4000 children be removed from the child care wait list. JK is absolutely the fastest way to reach that goal. In many rural communities, and in areas with marginalized children, it is the only way to provide childcare, since populations are so small and incomes so low, that no model of child care is viable.

There will be an exodus of ECE's to the school system and centers will close.

When ECE positions become available in the school system, some (not all) ECE's jump at the chance for better pay, benefits and working conditions. What has happened in every other jurisdiction is a strengthening of the sector by making it more stable. It provides a career ladder and has encouraged many ECE's to return to school and complete education degrees (e.g. the demand has led to UNB offering a 2+2 bachelor's degree that certifies ECE's to teach in primary). The ECE sector needs to be strengthened through transfer options and promotion possibilities. As a result, ECEs who left the sector for more stable employment, return to the sector, and more students enrol in ECE post-secondary education programs.

My child is not ready to be sent to a school or on a bus.

Only you as parents would know this, and it is completely your decision. Many families, for very legitimate reasons, choose not to send their child. That is why junior kindergarten is usually optional. We do know that when it is available and free, approximately 96% of children participate in kindergarten and more than 90% attend JK.

Is junior kindergarten better than quality ECE in a regulated center?

Research does not indicate that play-based learning in a JK environment is better than in a high-quality centre. That rationale has never been a point of discussion. What we are saying is that JK is the fastest way to child-care expansion; it readies children for school-start ensuring a smoother transition to schools; it establishes relationships between schools and families (especially marginalized families); it allows greater access to supports such as counselling, psychology, speech, inclusion; and it legitimizes the educational value of early learning and play-based pedagogy. Most importantly, because it is free, universal and part of public education, it is much more inclusive than regulated child care.



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My school is stressed and services are stretched thin. More students won't help that.

Every school, in every province, is dealing with rising demands for already stretched supports. Our current system is reactive – waiting for a child to fall far enough behind to warrant a referral. We need to identify these

children earlier and close these gaps before they widen. If a Speech Language therapist starts with a child before age 3 they can address 80% of their issues. If they wait until the child is 8 they can only address 20%. Earlier identification and intervention will free professionals time from dealing with children too late. School supports and resources are allocated on an enrollment basis, meaning a higher enrollment means more supports. JK will require additional resources, and a pilot program will help identify that, while ensuring they are delivered in a proactive approach to ready children.

Why should we start with pilot programs?

Starting with a few pilot programs allows you to discover the answers to these legitimate questions, and many more. It allows you to find out what works, what doesn't work and what additional supports / resources schools need to make it work. Pilots are closely monitored and evaluated to ensure lessons are learned while the children receive high quality care. It gives systems more certainty and greater comfort in expanding, at a pace that ensures continues success. While Canada has now enjoyed many lessons with over half 4-year-olds enjoying JK in their neighbourhood school, a "made in New Brunswick" model is essential to ensuring your children have the best start in life. We have an obligation to ensure that they receive nothing less.