



Margaret and Wallace McCain
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Expanding Public Education to Include Four-Year-Old Children

Findings of Recent Research

In Canada, just over half of 4-year-olds are enrolled in an early learning program that is part of the public education system and known as pre-primary, pre-kindergarten or Junior Kindergarten. Globally, educators increasingly[i] recognize the irrefutable evidence behind the lasting advantages for children[ii] and the economic wisdom for making the investment[iii].

In Atlantic Canada only Nova Scotia (NS) has a publicly funded, school based pre-primary program for 4-year-olds[iv]. Prince Edward Island (PEI) has a partial (15 hours a week) publicly funded, program operated in licensed early childhood centres. Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) is slowly phasing in a fee-based, pre-kindergarten program licensed as child care, operated by a third party that may be located in schools, while New Brunswick (NB) has yet to implement any school-based program for 4-year-olds.

In the spring of 2024, the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation, contracted MQO Research to explore awareness and support for public education for four-year-old children, especially perceptions about, and impacts from, NS's program. NS parents were surveyed and a series of focus groups were held with educators in NS, NB & NL. The results are compelling.

NS parents expressed overwhelming support for the Pre-Primary Program, strongly recommending it to other parents. Parents recognized the benefits of the program to their children, specifically naming strengthened language skills, improved social skills and overall happiness as dominant benefits. Parents also identified a positive impact on family finances. Quality of the teaching and the curriculum were noted aspects of the program. Enthusiasm for the program was especially evident in low-income families.

NS educators were unanimous in supporting a continuation of the program and offered many suggestions to strengthen it. Teachers from NB and NL supported the introduction of such a program, recognizing its potential benefits to a smoother school transition, better social and emotional skills, and reduced childcare burdens for families.

Early Child Educators in NS were equally unanimous in their support for the program. They called for the program to be more welcomed into the school community and integrated within the instructional team.



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Overall, educators and parents view the Pre-Primary Program, delivered as part of the public education system, as a valuable opportunity to enhance developmental outcomes and transition to school, while supporting families, especially those marginalized. Many insights were gathered in how to improve the NS program and implement it in NL and NB. Challenges can be addressed and are considered well worth the effort for

the sake of improving children's early learning and well-being. Appropriate resources, qualified staff, sufficient space, and inclusion supports are essential considerations. Better connection and integration, as well as stronger communication and collaboration, ensure smooth implementation and operation with the ethos of the neighborhood school.

[i] See: <https://theconversation.com/childrens-early-learning-belongs-in-neighbourhood-schools-209826>

[ii] See: <https://theconversation.com/children-gain-learning-boost-from-two-year-full-day-kindergarten-79549>

[iii] See: <https://alexandereconomicviews.com/2023/11/30/benefits-to-expanding-public-school-early-learning-and-child-care/>

[iv] See: <https://theconversation.com/nova-scotias-shift-to-publicly-funded-early-learning-and-child-care-wont-be-easy-but-its-critical-175206>