

Expanding Public Education to Include Four-Year-Old Children

Perspectives of Educators in Atlantic Canada



Margaret and Wallace McCain
Family Foundation Inc.

Educators across Nova Scotia (NS), New Brunswick (NB), and Newfoundland & Labrador (NL) were asked for their insights into publicly funded, school-based Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs, known as Pre-Primary (or Junior Kindergarten or Pre-Kindergarten in some provinces). MQO Research conducted a series of focus groups with primary school teachers (Kindergarten and Grade One) in the three provinces and Early Child Educators currently working in the NS program, operating since 2017.

NS educators were unanimous in supporting a continuation of the program and offered many suggestions to strengthen it. Teachers from NB and NL also supported the introduction of universal public education for four-year-old children, recognizing its potential benefits in terms of a smoother school transition, better social and emotional skills, and reduced childcare burdens for families. Across the provinces, educators view a school-based pre-primary program as an invaluable opportunity to enhance developmental outcomes and support families.

Despite this enthusiasm, educators were equally concordant in offering insights in how it could be improved in NS and implemented in NB and NL. NS educators were highly critical of how the province is implementing it, which may have been conflated with a general trend toward lower “readiness” levels among children in recent years, as witnessed by teachers in NL and NB as well. NS teachers reported little appreciation of the benefits of play-based learning and called for the teaching of “readiness skills” during the pre-primary year. This dissatisfaction stems primarily from two key issues: a lack of connection and integration with the pre-primary program, and insufficient communication and collaboration in the transition to school. Teacher concerns were exacerbated by overarching resource constraints within the educational system, including inadequate staffing, competition for physical space, and supports for children with special needs.

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 community of the school and integrated within the school’s instructional team. They also voiced concerns for resources, especially for children with special needs, and access to qualified staff. Again, better connection and integration, as well as communication and collaboration surfaced as dominant themes during both implementation and operation.

Overall, educators view school-based, public education for four-year-old children as a valuable opportunity to support families and children in transitioning into school. Challenges are widely considered to be addressable, and well worth the effort for the sake of improving children’s readiness and overall early year development.