



Margaret and Wallace McCain  
Family Foundation Inc.

# Expanding Public Education to Include Four-Year-Old Children

## Atlantic Region ECE Initiative

Young children are waiting for early learning and child care in Atlantic Canada and across the rest of the country. This matters. As children wait, their early learning is stifled, their parents are unable to work, with the economy foregoing needed skills, now and in the future. Instead, we can make early learning and child care quickly available and add spaces to serve a province's preschool population.

A significant part of the solution resides in our schools by offering universal Junior Kindergarten for 4-year-olds as an extension of public education. It is accessible in the neighborhood school, free of charge, and linked with existing resources and infrastructure. Existing school-based "before and after-school" programs help to accommodate parents' work schedules while offering stability for the children.

The success of Nova Scotia's Pre-Primary Program for four-year-olds illustrates the merits of such a solution. It is informed by similar programs in both Ontario and the NWT, as well as irrefutable international evidence that the program:

- boosts literacy and academic development,
- strengthens language skills,
- improves social skills,
- fosters behavioural regulation,
- reduces referrals to special education programs,
- lowers family stress,
- allows a smoother transition to school,
- allows mothers to return to work, and,
- improves family finances.

Provinces are making progress through the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreements. More spaces have been added and wage increases have reduced the flight of early childhood educators. However, expansion continues to be a major challenge with demand far outpacing supply, both in crowded urban areas, as well as in rural and remote communities. Relying on the existing infrastructure and the stability of schools, already in every community, converts existing space for younger children, especially in communities with partially empty school buildings.



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Moving the four-year-olds into the school system frees-up thousands of spaces in early learning centres, allowing those centres to focus on infants and toddlers.

The experience of jurisdictions with universal Junior Kindergarten shows that 4-year-olds benefit from the expertise of school staff and services,

especially marginalized students. They benefit from the stability of the school, inclusive supports and expertise, accessing busing, and being with older siblings. The experiential, play-based approach of early learning influences the teaching styles in kindergarten and the primary grades. This reciprocity of benefit extends throughout formal schooling, and results in better social and economic outcomes as adults.

The success of Nova Scotia's Pre-Primary Program is widely recognized by both parents and educators, who see it as a valuable boost to children's development and a vital support to young families. The program has given children a critical advantage in starting school while freeing-up space in early learning and child care centres for younger children.

The evidence for this is solid. The success is widely recognized. The economic proof is established. It makes sense for children, for schools, for families and for economies.

The Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation advocates for aligning the early years with the public school system and establishing a continuum of learning and care. Nova Scotia's Pre-Primary Program is a proven example of the wisdom of this approach, giving families support. A recent survey of Nova Scotia parents found overwhelming support for its universal Pre-Primary Program, specifically one that is:

- free to families,
- staffed by qualified early child educators,
- uses a play-based curriculum that aligns with the kindergarten curriculum,
- fully integrated into the culture of the school,
- under the leadership of the school principal,
- allows children to access the school bus, and,
- has before and after school programs, known as "wrap around" services.