

Nova Scotia to offer free pre-primary care at 43 locations ^[1]

Author: Walsh, Marieke & Quon, Alexander

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EXCERPTS

The Nova Scotia government unveiled the locations for its expanded pre-primary program - bringing the total number of schools offering the program to 43.

Education Minister Zach Churchill told reporters Tuesday that 50 pre-primary classes will open in the last week of September, contingent on hiring.

"This is a first for us, and we know based on evidence how important pre-primary programming is," Churchill said. "We know it will have outcomes that will impact their lives."

The program will operate during normal school hours for children who are at least four years of age by Dec. 31. The minister said the total cost for the first year will be \$4.1 million.

Looser staffing ratios in new pre-primary program

The government's pre-primary program will have looser educator to child ratios than programs run by child care centres for the same age group.

At the schools there will be one early childhood educator for every 10 children in a class. There will be three early childhood educators in classes with more than 20 children to a maximum of 24 children per class.

"Health and safety and quality are our top concern," Churchill said. "In other jurisdictions that have implemented a pre-primary program the ratio is one to 10."

Child care centres are required to meet a ratio of one early childhood educator for every eight children. Churchill said that ratio will stay in place but discussions with the centres will start to review the ratio.

The discrepancy was slammed by early child care centres and the opposition ranks. NDP MLA Claudia Chender said the more relaxed ratio should also apply to child care centres if it is "in fact a safe ratio."

New pre-primary locations in all English-speaking school boards

The government says that the sites were selected based areas where there was the greatest need, space available in schools, and few other options for parents. The program will be rolled out to all children within four years.

Churchill told reporters that currently only 25 per cent of children under the age of five access pre-primary programs that families have to pay for, the government wants that to move to 100 per cent use under the new public system. But it is a voluntary program.

Premier Stephen McNeil announced the plan during the May election. A move the province says will save parents up to \$10,000 a year in daycare costs.

The department has mapped out where all classes are to be offered and provided a list on their website.

Parents can pre-register their kids online or by calling 1-833-424-2084.

'A slap in the face'

A woman speaking on behalf of several not for profit child care providers called the pre-primary announcement "a slap in the face" and an insult to child care centres.

Bobbi-Lynn Keating, who runs the Peter Green Hall Children's Centre in Halifax, said the government's announcement leaves centres like hers in a precarious position and she doesn't think the new system will serve children well.

Pointing to the lower educator to student ratio and the fewer hours covered by the pre-primary program compared to programs like hers.

"What universal child care system is this that's only open from 8:30 to 3:00," she asked. "Parents are still going to need care for their children... where are they going to go."

Churchill said he recognized that opening a new government-funded program would have an "impact" on the centres, but he said that's why the first year of the program focuses on areas where there's a need for the service.

Critics also questioned the lack of consultation before the first year of the program was rolled out. Churchill said "robust" consultation with families and child care centres will start this fall.

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