

# Opinion: Nova Scotia's new pre-primary class gives kids a head start through play-based learning <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:**

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Recent investment in universal early childhood education in Nova Scotia is helping to shape a different future for the province's youngest generation and their families.

Elementary school in Nova Scotia has traditionally started with what's termed Grade Primary, when children are five years old. But now the province is moving into year three of rolling out a universal full-day, no-fee, early childhood education called the pre-primary program, similar to what is currently offered in both Ontario and the Northwest Territories as play-based junior kindergarten. Starting in the fall of 2019, 201 Nova Scotia schools will offer the pre-primary program, and by 2020 the province plans to offer it in every school community.

Investments in early childhood are necessary to address the inequities documented in our communities in Nova Scotia. We have the highest rate of child poverty — more than one in five children live in poverty — and we are the only province where these rates have increased over the past two years.

As researchers at the Early Childhood Collaborative Research Centre at Mount Saint Vincent University, we know it's well-established that early childhood development is a crucial social determinant of health. Children who experience socio-economic disadvantage gain the most from participating in quality early childhood education opportunities.

Early childhood development has long-term impacts not only on learning and health but also on our economy. For example, Statistics Canada data shows that difficulty finding early childhood programs may impact parents' ability to work.

In Nova Scotia, there are also particular concerns about early childhood vulnerability, defined according to the Early Development Instrument (EDI) used across Canada to monitor children's early development in five domains.

Teachers in schools capture data about children in their first year of school through a questionnaire survey that assesses physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development and communication skills and general knowledge. Children who score in the lowest 10th percentile are considered vulnerable — meaning that without additional support they may experience future challenges.

Data collected in Nova Scotia schools from 2015 and 2018 suggests a meaningful increase in the rates of overall vulnerability from 25.5 per cent to 28.8 per cent. The sample size in the respective years was different, but to give a sense of numbers: in 2014-15, 2,040 out of 7,985 children in their first year of school met the criteria for vulnerability and in 2017-18, it was 1,675 out of 5,817 children.

## Two educators for 20 children

Early childhood educators (ECEs) are critical to the successful delivery of this high-quality pre-primary program that shapes social and learning experiences for children. There are two ECEs with a group of 20 children. With more than 20 children, and up to a maximum of 24 children, a third educator is added. With more than 24 kids, a second classroom is opened.

Nova Scotia's newly launched Early Learning Curriculum Framework views children as capable, confident and curious.

The framework includes key early learning principles such as play-based learning, inclusion, diversity and equity. Educators follow what's called reflective practice — gathering information and gaining insights that inform decisions about how to support children's learning. They focus on their responsiveness to children through intentional teaching and valuing a child's cultural and social contexts.

Educators also aim to support successful transitions between home and children's early childhood education program, and into school by focusing on the continuity of learning experiences.

## Our findings

In the first year of the pre-primary program, 60 per cent of four-year-olds enrolled in the areas where it was offered — a huge success for a new program, and one that is expected to increase over time.

Through a 2017-18 family survey we captured significant learning about the program's success and areas for improvement as it reaches more children.

A total of 295 individuals responded to the survey, representing 33 per cent of the number of families enrolled in 2017-18. The following percentages of respondents identified themselves with these ethnic / cultural backgrounds: 37 per cent European; 16 per cent Acadian; nine per cent Mi'kmaq or other Indigenous heritage; seven per cent African; two per cent Asian. Twenty-eight per cent said they preferred not to answer and eight per cent said "other."

Results suggest the program is being well-received by families who report that it has supported their child's development and will enable a smoother transition into Grade Primary.

More than half of the surveyed families indicated that if their child did not attend the pre-primary program, the child would have been cared for by themselves or a family member. This suggests that the program is helping to support families that would not otherwise access early childhood education.

Most respondents (87 per cent) reported feeling their culture was reflected in the program, resources and space and 94 per cent felt that their culture and identity was respected by staff.

Families were pleased with the quality of the program and would recommend others to attend: 94 per cent agreed that they were happy with the quality of the program and the same number agreed that they would recommend the program to family or friends.

Some of the comments families shared were:

"My daughter looks forward to going everyday. She has made many friends and has gained insurmountable confidence in who she is."

"My child loves going to school everyday to learn through play with his favourite educators and his friends. He has developed more socially and it has prepared him for Grade Primary."

"The educators allow them to create and learn. The amount of outdoor play and discovery is so beneficial."

We are also learning that as the program grows we need to find more ways to support program quality. Families identified areas needing improvement, such as increased communication about daily activities. For example, while 90 per cent of respondents felt their child's educators kept them informed about their child's progress, 56 per cent of respondents felt they knew "a lot" about what their child does at school but 27 per cent indicated they knew "some."

### **The future for children and families**

Implementing this early childhood education program within schools helps create successful transitions and accessibility for children headed into Grade Primary.

To increase accessibility, a before- and after-school program pilot is also being implemented with an emphasis on movement, outdoor play and physical literacy.

The pre-primary program offers a unique opportunity to bring attention to early childhood pedagogical practices and raise the profile and public understanding of play-based learning.

We are looking forward to learning how this program continues to support children in the province.

#### **Related link:**

**Region:** Nova Scotia [3]

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