

Some Nova Scotia pre-primary students get access to buses, before-and-after care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

HALIFAX—Nova Scotia is trying to give pre-primary enrolment a boost by opening bus services and before-and-after-school child-care programs to students this fall at a minority of schools, with plans to expand the offerings for the 2020 school year.

The province has been rolling out universal pre-primary for 4-year-olds since 2017 and the play-based program is now available at about 200 sites, with about 4,500 students registered.

Pre-primary students at 56 of those sites will have access to school buses this September. At 40 sites, they'll have access to the province's before-and-after program, which is run in a collaboration with the regulated child-care sector.

Education Minister Zach Churchill made the announcement Tuesday, saying families had requested the changes.

"We just want to make this a more feasible option for people," Churchill said in an interview after the announcement. "This is about removing barriers."

Churchill did not have an estimate of how many more children would be able to access pre-primary because of the change.

The cost to the province for expanding the before-and-after program is yet to be determined. Churchill said the province currently spends about \$1 million annually, most of which covers subsidies for families that make less than \$70,000 per year.

Depending on the service provider, families pay \$15 to \$22 per day for the program. With the maximum subsidy, the cost for families drops to \$4 per day.

Busing for pre-primary students won't cost the province any additional money this year because the service will only be offered where there's space on existing buses.

Churchill said his department focused on areas with the greatest need for busing, which is rural Nova Scotia.

Halifax pre-primary students won't have access to busing until fall 2020, a time when there could also be a change in the service provider.

Churchill announced in June that the Halifax Regional Centre for Education was pulling the plug on its contract with Stock Transportation after widespread complaints.

Stock's current deal will end next spring, and a tender has been issued for a new contract or multiple contracts to take its place.

"In Halifax we want to make sure that this is part of tender and we don't want to add to an already challenging situation with busing in HRM," Churchill said about the decision not to offer busing to pre-primary students in Halifax this year.

NDP education critic Claudia Chender welcomed Tuesday's announcement.

"Our primary criticism from the jump has been that (pre-primary) was poorly planned and hastily rolled out," the Dartmouth MLA said in an interview.

Churchill's latest changes, according to Chender, could fix accessibility problems that critics started pointing out when pre-primary was first announced three years ago.

Related link:

Region: Nova Scotia ^[3]

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/19/08/some-nova-scotia-pre-primary-students-get-access-buses-and-after> [2]
<https://www.thestar.com/halifax/2019/08/20/some-nova-scotia-pre-primary-students-get-access-to-buses-before-and-after-care.html> [3]
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