

Free pre-kindergarten may not be available to all kids next fall ^[1]

Space, staffing issues still to be worked out, says education minister

Author: CBC News

Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 24 Oct 2019

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

A new free half-day pre-kindergarten program may not be available to all P.E.I. four-year-olds in the fall of 2020.

The province announced last week that it hoped to offer the optional pre-K program by next fall. But Friday, the minister responsible acknowledged that plan had hit some bumps.

"There are challenges around that, and primary among those are staff and spacing," said Brad Trivers, minister of education and lifelong learning. "But we want to be ambitious, and we want to move quickly because we think it's so important."

To launch a program that's universally accessible the province first needs to hire 30 new certified educators for the 300 additional kids, who aren't already enrolled in child-care programs.

Trivers isn't confident they'll be able to find that many educators by next September.

"In terms of the fall of 2020, we're going to focus on the kids that are already in the early childhood centres," said Trivers. "And, as best as possible, based on staffing, give the option for those that are not in early childhood centres, to send those kids."

'Lofty' goal

Finding 30 additional educators by next fall is "probably too lofty a goal," said Sonya Hooper, executive director of the P.E.I. Early Childhood Development Association, as there is already a shortage of professionals to fill existing positions.

"We have centres now that have the space ... but finding certified staff at Level 3, which is a two-year diploma in early childhood, is really challenging," said Hooper.

We can't take on any more children.— Elizabeth Jeffery

Elizabeth Jeffery, owner-director at Little Wonders Early Learning Centre, agrees — it's going to be a challenge to find those extra educators, and spots for more kids.

"We can't take on any more children. We're completely full," said Jeffery. "We have a wait-list of over 300 children. Unless I find more certified teachers, I can't offer anything beyond what we do now."

Jeffery's centre has the physical space to take on more children, but with training taking two years, it could be some time before any additional educators are available, she said.

"Where these new teachers are going to come from is beyond me. I just don't see how it can happen."

Some who run centres have a lot of questions too, including whether they'll end up losing kids to other programs.

That's because the government hasn't decided whether pre-K will only be offered at the provincially designated early years centres, that already have to follow a set curriculum.

"I have four-year-olds here currently doing a relatively pre-K program. It's not half-day but it is play-based within our centres," said Jamie-Lynn Mosher, who runs Rainbow Beginnings Early Learning Centre, which doesn't follow the government's curriculum.

"So would I lose those four-year-olds to a half-day funded program?"

She also doesn't know whether pre-K kids would have to attend a program separate from the other kids at her facility.

"When something like that is going to greatly affect you, and you have no idea the outcomes, the plans, the process, it kind of puts a sick feeling in your belly. You're not really sure what to expect," she said.

The province said last week it would cover the cost of half-day preschool for kids already attending early childhood programs, and offer new spots to kids who aren't in a program.

Trivers said Friday the province may look at covering part of child-care costs for those four-year-olds it can't find spots for.

According to the government, about 75 per cent of Island children are in early childhood programs and there are a dozen early childhood centres that offer their own pre-K programs.

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