

P.E.I. to roll out free, public pre-kindergarten this September ^[1]

Half-day program for 4-year-olds will be run by licensed child-care centres

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EXCERPTS

After a year's delay due to the pandemic, the province is assuring Islanders it will be ready to roll out public pre-kindergarten on P.E.I. this September.

The half-day, optional program is for all four-year-olds, and aims to provide a more level playing field when they enter the school system at age five.

"[It's about] good quality early learning and child care experiences for our children. It will absolutely support their transition from the early childhood age group and then onto school," said Carolyn Simpson, early years advisor with P.E.I.'s Department of Education.

The promise of the free program was a key plank in the PC's education platform during the 2019 election campaign.

The program, which the government estimates will cost \$3 million for the first year, will be delivered out of licensed child-care centres, including provincially-run early years centres.

Simpson said the curriculum will be the same as what those early years centres teach four-year-olds right now.

"I think now there is more clarity. Centres understand that what they've been doing for the last number of decades has been pre-kindergarten programming," said Sonya Hooper, the executive director of the Early Childhood Development Association of P.E.I.

"So really there's a clearer understanding that what they've been doing is acceptable and expected."

"They're quite confident they'll be able to expand and have the educators to do so.— Carolyn Simpson, Department of Education

Simpson said private child-care centres will likely have been using a similar curriculum.

"The curriculum frameworks for children of this age are built on what we know about child growth and development," she said.

"So non-designated centres would already understand that. So it won't really be new or foreign to anybody."

Simpson said centres will be adding additional spaces and staff to accommodate more children.

"The centres themselves are telling us that this fall, they're quite confident they'll be able to expand and have the educators to do so," she said.

Simpson said centres are seeing lower enrolment right now for next September than enrolment this year — something the government would like to see change.

"We would encourage any parents who aren't registered for a pre-K program at this point in time, to reach out to the registry, reach out to the licensed child-care centre of their choice, and register for this fall," she said.

"We are seeing a trend that we're under-registered, and so there are spaces available."

Unclear if there are spots for all kids

Three-quarters of Island four-year-olds are already enrolled at licensed child-care centres.

The province can't guarantee, however, there will be a spot for every four-year-old on P.E.I. in the new, public program.

Simpson said she hopes that will be possible, but if not, the government aims to meet its target of registering all four-year-olds in September 2022.

Ontario has had a junior kindergarten program since 2010, and Nova Scotia piloted a pre-primary program in 2017 that expanded to all schools in September 2020.

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