

Pre-K preps come with added challenges for P.E.I.'s French daycares ^[1]

In some centres, staffing and facility changes are needed to make the program work

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EXCERPTS

Francophone early-years centres on P.E.I. are facing some unique challenges as they gear up to launch public pre-kindergarten in the fall. The half-day program for four-year-olds was supposed to start in September 2020, for both English and French school boards — but was delayed due to COVID-19.

The province says it's on track to make pre-kindergarten available this fall, welcoming any child born in 2017 to the daily, free three-hour program. But for some francophone centres, facilities and staffing to support implementation remain a concern.

"It's just a matter of how we're going to divide the classroom," said Jennifer Gallant, director of the French early years centre in Rustico, Les Petits rayons de soleil.

At the centres in both Rustico and Rollo Bay, staff have limited space to work with, but need to make room for additional children.

The challenge is that francophone early-years centres are in schools — which also house community centres — so there isn't a lot of extra space available.

In Rustico, just two rooms are designated for the daycare, so staff are working to figure out the best way to accommodate more children.

"So whether we're putting in a wall, a permanent wall, a semi-permanent wall, we're trying to figure out different layouts that will work with having two groups in the same classroom, but divided," Gallant said.

Late last year, the province announced a \$385,000 fund to help centres with the costs of taking on additional children as part of the program. That grant was increased due to demand, and in the end, a total of \$490,000 was awarded to 21 centres across P.E.I., including the centres in Rustico and Rollo Bay.

Francophone staff harder to recruit

Another hurdle is staffing. With early childhood educators already in demand, French-language centres have the added challenge of finding francophones who are qualified to do the work, and are willing to work in rural areas.

"We need more staff," said Gallant. "More educators, definitely. And that's hard, especially out here in our wonderful little area, because it's hard to have anybody who speaks French also to come and stay."

Mélanie Beauparlant, director of Château des Étoiles in Rollo Bay, said the number of additional children she's able to offer pre-K spaces to at her centre will depend entirely on staffing.

"I absolutely need another person," said Beauparlant. "For example, I'm the director, but I'm full time in the classroom because I'm lacking somebody."

Another barrier is that early childhood educators are able to get a higher wage elsewhere in Canada. In recent years, the Association of Francophone Early Childhood Education Centres in P.E.I. has started recruiting abroad, through a federal government program that connects Canadian employers with skilled French-speaking candidates.

People don't often want to move to earn less money. So that's why we rely on overseas. And the benefit of that is it brings a lot of different cultures and that's beneficial for the children.- Melanie Beauparlant

"In Quebec, in Ontario, there's a lot more French people," said Beauparlant.

"But the salaries are way higher over there, so we cannot compete. People don't often want to move to earn less money. So that's why we rely on overseas. And the benefit of that is it brings a lot of different cultures and that's beneficial for the children."

Officials with the French early-years association said they are currently in the process of interviewing nine potential candidates from places like France, Belgium and Morocco.

"If we could get six of the nine here by September, I think we'd be very content," said Kathleen Couture, executive director of the association.

"We are working also with other people in the province to get more people trained, we have a few training programs going on right now," said Couture. "So we are hoping that staffing is not an issue."

Details needed from the province

Questions remain, though, about how payment will work for families who choose to keep their four-year-olds in care full-time.

"There are still not firm details on what the financial piece will look like," said Couture. "But we are looking at that right now with the province and we hope that that will come out before the end of June, so that we'll be ready for September."

Couture said acceptance to their pre-K program will be offered not just to francophone families and those who are rights holders; families who would like their children educated in French will also be considered.

"Our goal is not to say 'no' to anybody — which is very difficult when you're lacking space," said Couture.

"But we hope to get in all those children who are born in 2017, who desire an early-childhood education program in French or a pre-primary program in French. We're hoping to be able to accommodate everybody."

In a statement released recently, the French Language School Board reminded families not currently enrolled at early-years centres to register their children as soon as possible.

Region: Prince Edward Island ^[3]

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