

Education minister pressed on pre-kindergarten plan ^[1]

Liberal MLA says he'd like to see the government's plan for program

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EXCERPTS

Liberal MLA Heath MacDonald pressed Education Minister Natalie Jameson for more details on the province's pre-kindergarten program in the legislature Tuesday.

The half-day, optional program is for all four-year-olds, and aims to have kids enter the school system at similar learning levels. It's scheduled to roll out this fall, a commitment the minister re-issued on Tuesday.

"Over the last couple of weeks, there has been a tremendous amount of consultation. I don't know exactly the number of centres and families that were involved, but it's in the hundreds," Jameson said.

"There are some details still to be worked out. But like I said, there's been hundreds of folks involved in the consultations."

The province had hoped to launch the program at Island child-care centres last September, but COVID-19 changed that.

"When can the operators and families finally expect to hear details on the rollout of this plan, which is now being announced not once but twice by this government?" MacDonald said.

He raised concerns over the lack of public plan, as well as how existing home-based centres would adapt under the new program. He said the Liberal caucus is receiving questions from constituents.

"We need to understand what their plan is. We've briefly got tidbits of it, but we haven't really been given any information," MacDonald said later in an interview.

"I think it's important that they come clean. I think it's a good program, but this is the second minister now, and really we haven't seen a plan for it."

'It's extremely successful'

Jameson said the department has been working within the sector, is proposing an increase to early childhood education in the budget and has provided grants to each of the 21 child-care centres that applied.

"Currently this program's already offered in centres. So 76 per cent of Island children and four-year-olds are already taking part in this program, and it's extremely successful, actually," she said.

"In fact, my child is in the pre-K program."

But MacDonald said his concern is about the 24 per cent who are not currently in the program.

"Universal child care implies that every child across the province, no matter their community, place of residence, will have the same level of access within reason," he said.

"How will you ensure that children and families who rely on smaller, rural centres that are home-based have equal access to this service?"

Jameson said outside of the province's more urbanized areas — Charlottetown, Stratford, Montague, Cornwall and Summerside — there are 25 centres offering pre-kindergarten: 11 in Prince County, seven in Kings and seven in Queens.

"Currently in these centres there are 352 pre-kindergarten spaces with a capacity for 382," the minister said.

"In addition, five of the rural centres received a pre-kindergarten grant, so the expansion expected for an additional 57 spaces located in Tryon, Kensington, Souris, Bothwell and Mount Stewart."

MacDonald also asked if resources in child-care facilities would just be shifted, creating less infant spaces in Island centres.

"This is an important question, Mr. Speaker. When I just found out I was pregnant with my second child, I had put them on the registry, and most certainly, I think that this is what a lot of families are doing," Jameson said.

"I could be wrong, but I do hear that families are proving this to be successful. If they do put their children on that registry early, they are finding spaces."

Region: Prince Edward Island ^[3]

Tags: kindergarten ^[4]

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