

# N.S. pre-primary program lacked adequate planning before 2017 launch: auditor general <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Saltwire

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 7 Jul 2021

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## EXCERPTS

Nova Scotia's pre-primary program lacked adequate pre-planning before it was rolled out in 2017, the province's auditor general said in a report released Wednesday.

"With only five months between program announcement and launch, the department (Education and Early Childhood Development) didn't complete a thorough planning process, which may have contributed to some of the issues found in our audit," Kim Adair-MacPherson said in support of her findings.

The auditor general found that key activities were overlooked during the creation of the universal education program, including an analysis of the full implementation costs of the program and that the department didn't set specific measurable goals to evaluate the program's effectiveness or create a process to monitor risk.

The audit found that the department was not involved in determining the \$50 million committed by government to fund the program once fully implemented.

"We expected to see detailed information supporting the operational and capital costs required for each school at the initial planning phase, but no such analysis was completed by the department," the report reads.

"Without comprehensive cost projections, the department's ability to fully understand the financial implications of the program is reduced and its ability to plan effectively is diminished."

The audit found that the department had not determined the full cost of the program but management indicated that funding for pre-primary to the regional education centres and Conseil scolaire acadien provincial totaled \$49 million in 2020-2021.

"The \$49 million, according to the department, represents costs such as staffing, supplies, equipment and food for the classrooms," the report says. "However, costs such as renovations to schools and busing for pre-primary students are instead included as costs to the overall school system. Based on this, it is likely the full cost of implementing and running the pre-primary program is higher than the initial commitment of \$50 million."

The program was rolled out to schools without consistently ensuring staff had the required qualifications, background checks or orientation before working in the classroom, the audit found.

"Background checks are especially important for staff working with young children to ensure the learning environment is safe," Adair-MacPherson said.

In October, the province completed its four-year rollout of the program, announcing that every four-year-old in Nova Scotia now has access to pre-primary -- a free, universal early learning program.

The voluntary program has reached 252 school communities and provides programming for nearly 6,200 four-year-olds in 252 schools, 75 per cent of eligible students of that age in the schools' catchment areas. The province's pre-primary began its programming with 891 students in 46 schools in the 2017-18 academic year. That number accounted for 66 per cent of eligible pre-primary students in the area covered during the launch year.

Former premier Stephen McNeil, said at the October announcement that the program gives "every child, regardless of the socio-economic circumstances, their best start in life."

The auditor general acknowledged that the department has made program enhancements to respond to feedback, including the introduction of busing and before- and after-school care, since the program was launched in 2017.

The department completed consultations with both families and licensed daycare providers, but not until after the first year of pre-primary started.

“While the consultations helped inform some positive changes, identifying concerns in advance of implementation would have allowed time for licensed childcare providers to prepare for potential impacts and the department to identify strategies to support the industry,” Adair-MacPherson said.

The auditor general’s report makes nine recommendations to improve the program, including establishing specific and measurable goals for the program and introducing regular evaluations to determine if they are being met.

“Department focus is needed now to ensure pre-primary is an effective program and benefits students,” Adair-MacPherson said.

Other recommendations are that the department should:

- have a process in place to monitor risks on an ongoing basis;
- ensure all background checks for program staff are completed as required by policy before staff begin working in the classroom;
- complete and implement their new provincial policy around background checks;
- ensure early childhood educators’ credentials are verified when they are hired;
- develop a process to ensure all new program staff receive orientation prior to starting in the classroom;
- should clearly define and communicate roles and responsibilities related to the program consultants, managers, school principals and educators; and
- should develop and implement a formal complaint process for the program that includes clearly defined and communicated roles and responsibilities.

The department has agreed to all of the recommendations and will begin implementing the changes this year and complete them by the 2022-23 school year.

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