

First year of P.E.I.'s public pre-kindergarten program draws fewer kids than expected ^[1]

Number of four-year-olds attending child-care centres no greater than before program launched

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EXCERPTS

Eight months after P.E.I. launched its universal pre-kindergarten program at Island child-care centres, officials say the uptake hasn't been as strong as they anticipated.

In fact, the percentage of four-year-olds enrolled at licensed child-care centres is no greater now than it was before the free, 15-hour-per-week program launched in September.

"Our numbers are still pretty consistent with what they were prior to the publicly funded pre-K program," said Doreen Gillis, P.E.I.'s director of early childhood development. "We did anticipate that there would be an increase in the number of four-year-old children in those programs, and we did prepare for that increase."

Election promise

As the Progressive Conservatives explained when they pitched the program to voters during the 2019 election campaign, about 75 per cent of Island four-year-olds were already enrolled in pre-kindergarten.

The aim of the new publicly-funded program was to reach the other 25 per cent by making pre-kindergarten more affordable and accessible, so that all four-year-olds could enter public school on a more level playing field.

The province developed a pre-kindergarten curriculum and added 400 additional spaces at centres around the province.

However, Gillis said most centres were already offering much of what's in that curriculum. And most of those 400 new spaces have gone unfilled.

"What has changed is that the fee is now paid for that core 15-hour program," she said. "And for some centres, they may not have utilized our early learning framework. For those centres, that would be new for them this year."

Pandemic to blame?

Gillis said it's not clear why the uptake for the program hasn't been greater, and the province hasn't done any research to find answers.

It was initially supposed to launch in September 2020, but government postponed it a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cheryl MacKay, supervisor at Precious Jewels Daycare in Charlottetown, suspects the pandemic may still be deterring some parents from enrolling their kids.

"Some parents were nervous. Some parents, they got that time at home and want to keep that time at home," said MacKay. "With flexible working schedules, working from home, a bit of a fear of COVID ... some maybe chose that this would be a year they would keep kids home."

MacKay suspects if more parents were aware of the benefits of sending their children to pre-kindergarten and other early learning programs, they might be more likely to sign them up.

"It's more than reading stories and changing bums and playing games of tag. I know a lot of early childhood educators, we've been working to get the message out, that this is so much more," she said. "We're scaffolding learning, we're looking at where their interests lie and building on those, and trying to help them become these beautiful little humans that can go on to be successful in the rest of their life."

"Research would tell us that a child who attends consistently for a minimum of 15 hours, that sets them on a good path as they continue their learning journey through the years after that," added Gillis.

'Numbers will increase'

Gillis maintains her department has adequately promoted the pre-K program, and will continue to do so throughout the summer.

"We do anticipate the numbers will increase from year to year, as more people become aware of this program and what's available to them," she said.

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