

N.L. announces new pre-kindergarten program in bid to create more regulated child-care spaces ^[1]

Expert says there are things to watch for to ensure program quality doesn't suffer

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EXCERPTS

About 600 more child-care spaces will open up in Newfoundland and Labrador this fall, following the provincial government's announcement Thursday of a new pre-kindergarten early learning pilot program.

The program is expected to launch in 35 schools in 28 communities, but one expert says there are still some things to keep an eye on.

David Philpott, a retired Memorial University professor in education and longtime advocate for improving the province's daycare system, told CBC News on Thursday the program is an excellent step forward — one that was a long time coming.

"I'm relieved that it's in schools because it has to be seen as educational. It has to be tied to the curriculum," Philpott said.

"We need a continuum of learning that begins in the early years and follows these children right through."

The program was created with \$347 million in federal funding announced in March and is slated to be fully implemented by 2025-26 with about 3,100 regulated spaces in N.L., operated by non-profit organizations and not the school district.

Families will pay the regulated child-care rate for each child in the program: \$15 per day for the rest of 2022, and \$10 a day starting in 2023. The program will run full time, including during the summer.

But Philpott says the workforce isn't there yet. He was part of a team that pitched a similar idea in 2010. The plan at the time was to have two pilot schools in the province provide free child care: inside the school system and run by the school system. In 2017 Philpott also sat on the province's education task force, when he once again pitched the idea.

"Without question, we do not have enough of well-trained early childhood educators in this province because they have been so poorly paid. It's a sector that has been allowed to [have] very low wages and poor employment prospects," he said.

In the March funding announcement the federal and provincial governments included a one-time investment of about \$6.5 million and a slew of other new measures — including an expected wage increase for early childhood educators by Jan. 1 and about 700 additional seats in post-secondary early learning and child-care programs — to support the early childhood workforce. The hope is to increase the percentage of fully certified early childhood educators working in the sector to at least 60 per cent by 2025-26.

Philpott said that's also a great step but he's concerned the push for more educators will compromise training.

"Government has to watch the quality of these new programs and ensure that we get highly qualified early childhood educators and not people who have been raced through programs," he said.

"We can't afford that. We've got to make sure that these people are well trained."

Open to kids starting kindergarten in 2023

Registration dates for families will be announced by the non-profits running the program once opening dates are finalized for each site.

The Education Department released a request for proposals Thursday for established groups to submit their qualifications and apply to run the program. In a press release, the department said preference will be given to organizations that demonstrate they can run multiple locations, with a June 6 deadline for submissions.

The first locations will open in either fall 2022 or winter 2023, the Education Department said, to any child who starts kindergarten in September 2023. Spots will be available to any child in that age range whether they have existing child care or not, as any child transferring from an existing child-care spot will open up a space for another child.

At a news conference Thursday, Education Minister Tom Osborne said the provincial government worked with the school district to

determine which schools had the capacity to allow a classroom for the program. He said some are ready to go but others need some modifications.

"We also looked at the population and demand for early learning in different areas of the province," he said.

"I know that other communities and other parents in other areas of the province will look to have pre-K as soon as we can expand, and we're working already to expand for next year."

Region: Newfoundland ^[3]

Tags: licensed child care ^[4]

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