

Letter: The true challenge with N.L.'s pre-kindergarten plan ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Last year's \$30 billion federal investment in child care is the largest public outlay in social policy since Medicare. In accepting its share of the funding, Newfoundland has to get early learning right. It is indeed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

That's why the recent announcement that the province has contracted the YMCA to manage the pre-kindergarten program is much more than an announcement — it is a challenge to both parties to lay the foundation of a program that has lasting impact.

Under the agreement, the YMCA commits to begin opening pre-kindergarten spaces in the fall of 2022. Enrolment is available to 600 children but at a cost of \$15 per day to families (\$10 in 2023). The federal investment precludes expansion of pre-kindergarten within K-12 education.

While this limitation influences where we start with learning programs for four-year-olds, it cannot be where we end up. For example, Nova Scotia is using federal funding to expand its existing pre-kindergarten system in a program that is managed by the education ministry and the educators are public employees, with commensurate benefits. No fees are charged to families. The latter point is critical. Made-in-Canada experience has demonstrated that even a modest charge prevents the most vulnerable families from enrolling their children, penalizing those who could most benefit.

Instead of building universal pre-kindergarten, N.L. is creating more four-year-old child care. This can be a beginning but it cannot be the end game. In the 2017 Premier's Task Force on Education, the province committed to follow the lead of other provinces in implementing a universal two-year kindergarten program, beginning at four years of age. Research informs that model with a convincing argument that tying junior kindergarten to the K-12 system reaps the best outcomes.

That model must remain the goal: free of charge, accessible to all and fully integrated within the K-12 system. The public contract with the YMCA has to be explicit and strategic in building a continuum of curriculum, pedagogy, and professional development that will optimize the investment.

As details of N.L.'s plan continue to emerge, the critical need to monitor quality through independent evaluations of new pilot and training programs becomes more apparent. The professional qualifications of early child educators are internationally identified as the surrogate measure of quality of early years programs.

Both the Department of Education and the YMCA will benefit from this arrangement but in the long-term the children of the province have to benefit the most. The YMCA's vision statement is committed to social responsibility. Research directs how to ensure optimal outcomes for young children.

In accepting responsibility to begin pre-kindergarten in this province, the YMCA assumes a commitment to strengthen our communities by following research and positioning the province with a continuum of public education that begins at four years of age and is independent of any fee for families. Social responsibility means explicitly working itself out of the role.

Region: Newfoundland ^[3]

Tags: child care ^[4]

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