

The kindergarten dilemma [CA-PE] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Five-year-old Jonathan Burton is getting ready to start kindergarten in the fall. To help him prepare, his mother, Lisa Burton, placed him in a pre-kindergarten program this year.

Three days a week he puts on his backpack and proudly tells his mom, 'Let's go to school!'

Jonathan isn't cutely mixing up his terminology here.

He really does go to school. His pre-kindergarten program is run in a classroom at Prince Street Elementary in Charlottetown.

Little Jonathan loves it there, Burton said.

"He likes the fact that they can go outside and play in a school playground, and he likes to be able to go to the library and pick out a book and say he picked it out himself."

This is exactly why she chose the Chances Smart Start program, she said.

"I wanted something in a school setting so he could be best readied for Grade 1."

But the native Newfoundlander was surprised to find her son will not have the opportunity to continue his early childhood education in a school setting.

That's because Prince Edward Island is the only province in Canada that doesn't offer kindergarten in the school system.

"I was hoping there was a kindergarten in the school, like we have back home," Burton said. "Because then he's around other children and when he starts Grade 1 it's not too hard a transition."

Most Island kindergartens are in child care centres, church basements or community halls.

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Lately, the state of P.E.I.'s kindergarten system has been a hotly debated topic at many levels — from parents chatting about it at children's birthday parties to politicians in their provincial cabinet meetings.

The province's recent changes to Grade 1 age of entry dates have strongly affected Island kindergartens, leaving them scrambling to accommodate as many as 250 newly eligible five-year-olds into their programs.

This unexpected cabinet decision has effectively shone a spotlight on the current kindergarten system.

Early childhood educators were left wondering why government would change the Grade 1 age of entry from Aug. 31 to Oct. 31 with no forewarning or consultation. It was especially frustrating to some who, only a few years ago, worked for many years lobbying government to push the age of entry back from its previous Jan. 31 date to the end of August.

Also, despite the ministerial change in Grade 1 eligibility, department officials urged parents to 'stay the course' and not take advantage of the new eligibility dates.

Since that announcement just over a week ago and the confusion that ensued, strong rumblings have begun in key stakeholder circles that more changes to kindergarten could be forthcoming — namely that kindergarten could be moved into the schools.

Currently, the province subsidizes most of P.E.I.'s community kindergarten spaces. Island kindergartens are offered in a variety of settings, but all follow a standardized curriculum developed and overseen by the Department of Education. This curriculum falls closely in line with the curriculums in other Atlantic provinces, which helps to standardize outcomes across the region.

Also, kindergarten on P.E.I. is a half-day program.

But if the P.E.I. Teachers' Federation had its way, much of this would change.

The organization believes kindergarten should be part of the public school system and should be a full-day program. The federation has been lobbying government to make these changes, and even passed a resolution on the topic at a recent semi-annual meeting.

With standardized assessments having been recently introduced into Island schools, public school teachers are struggling to find ways to help their students reach better outcomes.

Teacher's Federation president Phillis Horne said a lot of the research she's seen shows students at the end of Grade 3 — and even up to the end of Grade 7 — perform better if they started in full day public kindergarten.

"If assessments are the way we're going to go," Horne said. "If the children are expected to reach certain outcomes in comparison to students in the rest of the Atlantic provinces, they should be given the same amount of time to prepare for it."

But Anne Miller, an early childhood educator who also works with the Early Childhood Development Association (ECDA), said all the research she's seen shows just the opposite.

The association is strongly opposed to any move of kindergartens into the school system.

"Our approach is play based," Miller said. "We play to deliver the curriculum. And we do guided reading and we do writing and math. All child development study will show that play is how a young child learns most effectively."

There are also many other advantages to having kindergartens in the community rather than in the schools, said the province's senior director for education, Linda Lowther.

One is that they are currently offered in a variety of settings, so kindergarten programs tend to be in more communities.

"If I compare the number of kindergarten programs we have with the number of schools with Grade 1, there are nearly twice as many kindergartens as schools," Lowther said. "So likely in a lot of cases kindergartens are in communities possibly closer to where parents are."

This offers parents a diversity of choice in selecting a centre, Lowther added.

The maintaining of parental choice is one of the main reasons the ECDA believes the system should stay out of schools.

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And although she maintains Island kindergartens should remain community-based, being in a school does have its perks, she said.

"I think that I'm lucky to be in a school. But for many, that's not where they want their early childhood centre," Miller said. "But it certainly does afford me some things I might not have if I was across the street."

Erin Wall is another early childhood educator who teaches kindergarten in a school. The Belfast Kindergarten has been located in a classroom at Belfast Consolidated since the early '80s.

"Because we're in the school system we have access to everything in the school — we have access to the school library, we have access to the gym, we have access to the lunch program."

But the main thing Wall loves about being in the community's elementary school is the close dialogue she has with her students' Grade 1 teacher.

She previously taught kindergarten in a Charlottetown centre where she didn't have the same opportunity for close interaction with the Grade 1 teachers.

Her five-year-old students even ride on the school bus every day.

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She said she believes all kindergartens should be in schools.

But if all Island kindergartens were to move into the public school system, it could mean a lot of early childhood educators losing their jobs, Miller said.

If such a move were to happen, kindergarten teachers would likely be grandfathered into the public school system, but they'd also likely be given a certain number of years to get their education degrees — as public school teachers are required to have, Miller added.

In New Brunswick when kindergarten was brought into the school system, the kindergarten teachers were given six years to get their degrees.

"That meant that they still worked full-time in the field and went to night classes for six years," she said.

For many, this option was too much for them to continue as educators, Miller said.

For these and many other reasons, the ECDA supports only a community-based kindergarten system.

"We've been delivering the community-based system across P.E.I. for more than 34 years. We believe that what we're providing is best," said ECDA chair Sonya Corrigan.

Of course, little Jonathan Burton is blissfully unaware of all this. He just enjoys going to the big kids' school.

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- reprinted from The Guardian

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Tags: kindergarten ^[3]

Prince Edward Island ^[4]

pre-school ^[5]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/08/03/kindergarten-dilemma-ca-pe> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7852> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/kindergarten> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/prince-edward-island> [5]

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