

Pilot program to prep four-year-old students is in limbo [CA-NS]

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EXCERPTS

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The future of a pilot program that prepares four-year-olds for school is up in the air because of the provincial government's decision to extend the cut-off date for starting school.

"It does impact quite significantly on the pre-Primary program," Education Department spokesman Peter McLaughlin said yesterday. "I think the clear message is that pre-Primary is going to be changed."

He was responding to comments by Liberal education critic Leo Glavine, who said he's under the impression the pilot program won't continue. He said the message at a recent briefing session with the program co-ordinator was "don't get too excited about a fourth year."

The pilot program began in September 2005 in 19 schools across the province, with about 350 young children enrolled. Its play-based curriculum aims to prepare children for the formal school experience and foster a love of learning and excitement about school.

"Every indication is that, as successful as this program has been, it will not continue," Glavine told The Daily News.

He said the province should make an announcement right away, since the program's future affects school boards - who administer it and hire the staffers - parents, children, the early childhood educators in the classroom, and even nursery-school operators.

"There is a degree of urgency," said Glavine.

The department realizes that, said McLaughlin, and an announcement will be coming "very soon."

Changing the school-start cut-off date from Oct. 1 to Dec. 31 - meaning all kids born in 2003 are eligible to start Primary next September - will bring in an estimated 2,100 extra students across Nova Scotia.

"That's a significant number," said McLaughlin. "The question is, do you bring in three-year-olds to fill that gap? Or is that too young? You'd have to rethink the curriculum then because you've got an even younger group of kids - three-year-olds - and you've also got transportation issues: much smaller kids on big buses."

Still, he said early-childhood education may still be delivered, just in a different way.

Halifax Regional School Board administers the pre-Primary program in four of its schools, with 54 students. Spokeswoman Shaune MacKinlay said the timing is important because early registration happens in February.

"Right now we are just in a holding pattern," she said.

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