

# Province committed to expanding pre-kindergarten in Saskatchewan <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

Two boys stand at the tiny sink inside the pre-kindergarten classroom at Judge Bryant Elementary School, washing their hands.

One looks up and grins, a line of bright red jam smeared across his face.

Snack time has just finished for the 16 students who come here four mornings a week to learn as they play with everything from bowls and spoons to sand, paint, blocks and boxes.

Meanwhile, the snack table has been converted into a craft table where the three-and four-year-olds sit, threading Froot Loops and Cheerios onto strings.

"This one isn't going to fit," says one little girl, holding up a Cheerio and popping it into her mouth.

Over the other side of the classroom, a boy in a bright yellow plastic smock cheerfully creates art by splattering purple and red on paper at the painting table.

It might look like organized chaos, but every element in the room has been chosen because it helps children's development.

In the coming years, the provincial government is aiming to have pre-k classrooms like this one available to every four-year-old in Saskatchewan.

There's no indication about how much that will cost, but given only about one-third of children aged three to four currently attend pre-k, it's likely to be a fair chunk of change.

As things stand, pre-k is only available for children considered vulnerable; those with socialization issues or whose families have language or socio-economic barriers.

Given the narrow scope for enrolment, waiting lists can be long, with up to 20 families at each school hoping their child will secure a spot.

Although schools try to expand their programs according to need, a lack of physical space for new classrooms makes it hard.

The number of pre-k classes in Saskatchewan has increased by 85 per cent since 2007, but there's a continued focus on creating more.

"Our goal is to have all four-year-olds in pre-kindergarten in the future, and certainly, if we can get vulnerable three-year-olds involved in the learning process, then so much the better," says Education Minister Russ Marchuk.

"Obviously, the more ready students are to come to school, the more they're able to engage in the learning process and the better the results will be in the long-term for their success. Investment in the early years of education is absolutely important to communities as we move forward."

University of Regina associate professor in early education Patrick Lewis says it's a "wonderful" idea - though he has one caveat.

"As long as they continue to use the play-based and inquiry driven curriculum," he says.

"Through play, children are really building a foundation for learning. It's a fabulous idea. It's been a long time coming, but it would be of great benefit as long as it was done properly."

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Back inside the Judge By-rant pre-k classroom, a boy starts yelling that his sandcastle has been destroyed.

Teacher Peggy Adamack exudes calm as she walks over to him, explaining, "You need to use your inside voice, because your friend next to you can hear you very well."

The boy nods, looks thoughtful, and goes back to running a pizza cutter through the sand.

"Everything in here encourages and stimulates growth - some things work on fine motor skills, some on gross motor skills," Adamack explains.

"The environment might be structured, but it's a play and exploration approach. We also use lots of children's literature. Sometimes the words might be too advanced, but often these books have great illustrations."

The aims of pre-kindergarten education include socialization, speech, physical and language development, and family involvement.

Morgan Reed, pre-k to Grade 3 superintendent with Regina Public Schools, says there's often a "huge" change in children who go through the program.

"I think families are often very appreciative they have the chance to send their children to pre-k," she says.

"They get so much exposure to literacy ... and the opportunity to interact with their peers in a play-based environment."

Sean Chase, assistant superintendent of education services with Regina Catholic Schools, agrees.

"These pre-k kids are just so ready to learn from Day 1," he says.

Chase says establishing more programs "makes perfect sense" when it comes to educational outcomes - though the logistics could prove difficult.

"There's a huge amount of research about how beneficial pre-k education can be for children ... and I think any child would benefit greatly from the exposure to it," he says.

"Honestly, I think any parent would jump at the chance to have their child in a pre-k program, because it's a phenomenal program."

-reprinted from the Star Phoenix

**Region:** Saskatchewan [2]

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