



JIMMY PRATT
FOUNDATION

MAKING SPACE

2023 Roadmap on
Early Learning &
Childcare

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It is an exciting time for young children and their families in Newfoundland and Labrador. Fees for regulated child care are set at \$10/day. Our Early Childhood Educators are well-qualified to provide high-quality programs – and the workforce is growing.

Still, however, most parents cannot find a space in regulated childcare. According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 72% of young children in Newfoundland and Labrador live in childcare deserts, defined as a postal code where there are more than three children per licensed childcare space.¹ This proportion is the second highest in all of Canada. In St. John's, there is less than 1 licensed space for every 10 infants.²

The childcare crisis keeps parents home from work and children from learning and socializing. It also pushes families into unregulated childcare, where they might pay high fees for programs of variable quality. A lack of regulated spaces disproportionately affects children and families who are already vulnerable.

The provincial government is responsible for the expansion of the system to guarantee a regulated, high-quality childcare spot for every child. Today's families can't wait years for the system to improve. **Our roadmap proposes 5 pathways supported by researchers and advocates that would help the government create more regulated spaces in a matter of months.** While there are many possible strategies for building a publicly-funded Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system, this document focuses on 5 priority areas especially relevant to our province – retaining the ELCC workforce, building the public system, introducing Junior Kindergarten, leveraging the school system, and developing targeted strategies to increase rural and Indigenous childcare spots.

¹ Macdonald and Friendly, "Not Done Yet: \$10-a-Day Child Care Requires Addressing Canada's Child Care Deserts," 4.

² Macdonald and Friendly, 6.

About this document

This document is for parents, advocates, educators, policymakers and others who are working towards a universal system of Early Learning and Child Care in Newfoundland and Labrador. It summarizes decades of research and lessons learned from all over the world as they are relevant to our province's context.

These priority areas have emerged from the Jimmy Pratt Foundation's engagement with the ELCC sector and the broader community sector. They have also been informed by the Foundation's Steering Committee – a committee of 10 parents and educators from across Newfoundland and Labrador. The priority area on Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare is guided by the discussions of the NL Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Working Group, an informal meeting that the Foundation convenes in partnership with the Assembly of First Nations Office of the Regional Chief (Newfoundland & Nova Scotia).

Each of the pathways will increase the number of spaces in regulated childcare without compromising on the quality of programs. All of the proposed strategies are aligned with the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Canada-Wide ELCC Agreement (2021-2026) and build on actions taken so far in the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 Action Plans.

About the Jimmy Pratt Foundation

The Jimmy Pratt Foundation's vision is that Newfoundland and Labrador is a place where all children and youth will thrive, even in the face of adverse circumstances. We know that high-quality, play-based Early Childhood Education can set children up for success in school and in life, which is why it has been our Foundation's focus since we launched in 2010.

The Jimmy Pratt Foundation has published three discussion papers on the early years in our province: "The Early Years Last a Lifetime" (2013), "Growing Education Down to Include the Early Years" (2014), and "Let's Get it Right! Early Childhood Education for the Next Generation" (2022). With input from the Jimmy Pratt Foundation, the provincial government established integrated governance within the Department of Education in 2014 and implemented full-day kindergarten in 2015.

Inclusion

The focus of this document is on mechanisms for creating more regulated childcare spaces. The fact remains, however, that for many families, even if a space were available, it would be out of reach. Children with disabilities are consistently excluded from regulated childcare. For many families (especially those with multiple young children), \$10/day is too costly and subsidy programs are stigmatizing and complicated to navigate. Racialized and newcomer families face cultural barriers, language barriers and discrimination when they seek out regulated childcare.

For some families, moreover, regulated childcare is not a suitable option. This does not mean that children should miss out on the socialization and learning that takes place in an early learning setting. For these children and families, programs like Healthy Baby clubs, Language Nests, and Aboriginal Head Start are a lifeline. Many of these programs operate in Family Resource Centres and their satellite locations.

These issues of inclusion are usually lost in the discussion about \$10/day childcare and spots. Ironically, the children and families who are excluded stand to gain the most from the support and socialization that early learning programs provide.



Pathway 1:

Retain Early Childhood Educators

Across the country, provinces and territories are scrambling to recruit and retain a workforce of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) to support the promise of universal, \$10-a-day childcare. Although the ECE workforce is receiving unprecedented attention right now, these problems are not new – nor are the solutions complicated!

The challenges facing ECEs – and by extension, all of us who rely on ECEs – are well-documented. ECEs leave the sector due to low compensation and poor working conditions, and new ECEs are not entering the field quickly enough to replace them. It is both an issue of recruitment and retention. In 2019, a survey of ECEs, former ECEs and licensees in our province reported that higher wages and increased benefits would lead to higher recruitment of ECEs; a report in 2007 found the same thing.³ The solutions are straightforward and have been for decades.

Recommendations

The provincial government has committed to increasing the number of qualified ECEs in the workforce. There have been promising developments in recruitment, including a range of bursaries and expanded training options.

But while Newfoundland and Labrador’s ECE wage grid is a step towards an appropriate compensation package for ECEs, without meaningful changes to working conditions, and reasonable benefit packages, recruitment initiatives are akin to turning up the tap into a leaky bucket. A 2019 survey found that only 28.2% of respondents received paid coffee breaks. The same survey found that only 47.2% of respondents had paid sick days, and just 49.6% had any paid vacation.⁴

- Introduce health and dental benefits and pension programs for ECEs;
- Require licensees to provide paid sick days, paid vacation and paid coffee breaks in order to access provincial funding. Adjust provincial funding formulas to account for these costs;
- Fund professional learning “close-out” days for all ECEs, and, and work with operators to provide alternate care arrangements for children or cover parent fees on close-out days.

Further Reading

McCuaig, Kerry, Emis Akbari, and Allison Correia. “Canada’s Children Need a Professional Early Childhood Education Workforce.” Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, April 2022.

³ Don Gallant and Associates, “Examination of Recruitment and Retention within the Regulated Early Learning and Child Care Workforce in Newfoundland and Labrador,” 31.

⁴ Don Gallant and Associates, 50.

Pathway 2: Implement Junior Kindergarten

For over a decade, many Canadian provinces and territories have been experimenting with school-based programs for children in the years before school entry. These programs create space in early years programs by freeing up space occupied by four-year-olds. They also prepare children for a more seamless transition to further learning. A 2-year kindergarten experience for 4- and 5-year-olds leads to better outcomes for children than a 1-year kindergarten experience – especially for children who are vulnerable at school entry.⁵

In our province, children start kindergarten in their neighborhood school at age 5. Two models have been proposed for 4-year-olds: a pre-Kindergarten program, and a Junior Kindergarten program. The Premier’s Taskforce on Education recommended integrating 4-year-olds into the school system in 2017.⁶ The provincial government accepted this recommendation in 2017⁷ and was on track to implement Junior Kindergarten in June 2021, before being sidelined by the COVID pandemic.⁸ The similarities and differences between the two are summarized below.

	Pre-Kindergarten	Junior Kindergarten <small>(as recommended by the Premier’s Task Force)</small>
Age	four-year-olds	four-year-olds
Educators	Early Childhood Educators	Early Childhood Educator and primary teacher
Administration	Not-for-Profit Operator	Department of Education
Regulations	Childcare	Education
Bussing	No	Yes
Cost	\$10/day	Free
Location	Neighborhood school	Neighborhood school
Hours of operation	Typically 8:30-6:30 Monday-Friday; some licensees offer extended hours	School hours (approximately 8:30-2:30, Monday-Friday), with school-based wrap around programs
Calendar	Year-round, excluding statutory holidays	School calendar
Funding	Federal	Provincial
Counted towards CWELCC targets	Yes	Probably

While the pre-Kindergarten program has shown promise at some pilot sites, it has not come close to meeting expectations. The pre-Kindergarten pilot has struggled to recruit sufficient Early Childhood Educators in many locations. Unlike Junior Kindergarten, moreover, it is not a universal program – meaning that many of the most vulnerable children will be excluded by fees and lack of transportation.

⁵ McCoy et al., “Impacts of Early Childhood Education on Medium-and Long-Term Educational Outcomes”; Taggart et al., “Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education Project (EPPSE 3-16+).”

⁶ The Premier’s Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes, “Now Is the Time: The Next Chapter in Education in Newfoundland and Labrador,” 105.

⁷ Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, “The Way Forward: Education Action Plan,” 14,34.

⁸ Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, “Education Action Plan Update,” 8.



Recommendations

- Implement Junior Kindergarten in schools where there is demand, as per the recommendations of the Premier’s Task Force;
- Amend the Schools Act (1997) to allow schools to offer programs to pre-school aged children, as per the recommendations of the Premier’s Task Force;
- Independently evaluate the Pre-Kindergarten pilot program in terms of accessibility, affordability, quality and inclusion. Regular assessment and evaluation of ELCC programs has been linked to higher quality.⁹

Further Reading

The Premier’s Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes. “Now Is the Time: The Next Chapter in Education in Newfoundland and Labrador.” St. John’s, NL, July 21, 2017. <https://www.gov.nl.ca/education/files/leap-report.pdf>.

*McLean, Christine, Jessie-Lee D. McIsaac, Oriana Mooney, Sarah B. Morris, and Joan Turner. “A Scoping Review of Quality in Early Childhood Publicly-Funded Programs.” *Early Childhood Education Journal*, July 28, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01372-9>.*

⁹ McLean et al., “A Scoping Review of Quality in Early Childhood Publicly-Funded Programs.”

Pathway 3:

Drive public-sector childcare expansion

Most countries with high levels of childcare coverage have one thing in common – the majority of childcare is delivered by governments, while the private childcare sector (including not-for-profit and for-profit operators) plays a much smaller role. In Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, France and Slovenia, most childcare is delivered by municipalities.¹⁰ Public childcare can also be operated by school boards, Indigenous governments, healthcare authorities and the provincial government.

Why does publicly delivered childcare work? Governments have tools at their disposal that not-for-profit organizations do not. They have access to demographic data to help them forecast demand for childcare. They also benefit from economies of scale in the areas of construction, human resources, and administration. Governments can more easily use vacant public buildings for new projects. Generally speaking, public-sector centres are the best employers, providing the best working conditions for ECEs with less staff turnover, better working conditions and better benefits.¹¹

The past two years have shown that the not-for-profit sector will not fill every gap in our system. While not-for-profit centres do not extract a profit from their operations, they can still struggle to break even. Some not-for-profit operators in Newfoundland and Labrador lose money operating licensed childcare and must reallocate funds from other parts of their organization to make ends meet. Not-for-profit centres are unlikely to get off the ground if they cannot break even, which is more of a gamble in rural and remote communities.

Not-for-profit childcare centres also require a great deal of volunteer labour that might not be readily available in every community. Volunteer board members must become fundraisers, contractors, HR professionals, and pedagogical leaders – just so that their community will have an essential service. This model of childcare development disadvantages communities who do not have this volunteer labour at their disposal.

Recommendations

According to the 2022-2023 Action Plan, the provincial government will be contracting a consultant to guide their strategy on not-for-profit expansion. While this will certainly be helpful, the provincial government can take action now by creating spaces in the public sector:

- The Department of Education is in the best position to operate before and after-school services, and should do so where there is demand;
- Amend the *Municipalities Act (1999)*, *City of St. John's Act (1990)*, *City of Mount Pearl Act (1990)*, and *City of Corner Brook Act (1990)* to allow municipalities to directly provide childcare services;
- In a nation-to-nation relationship, provide funding and regulatory support to Indigenous governments who choose to operate childcare programs.

¹⁰ Childcare Resource and Research Unit, “How Publicly Delivered Child Care Services Contribute to Accessibility.”

¹¹ McCuaig, Akbari, and Correia, “Canada’s Children Need a Professional Early Childhood Education Workforce.”

Further Reading

Childcare Resource and Research Unit. “How Publicly Delivered Child Care Services Contribute to Accessibility.” *Moving from Private to Public Processes: A Series on Creating Child Care in Canada*. Childcare Resource and Research Unit, February 2022.

Case Studies

- In rural communities in Saskatchewan and Alberta, municipalities have stepped in to provide childcare where not-for-profits could not break even.¹²
- In Quebec, school boards (a public entity) are required to operate before and after-school where there is demand. By contrast, pre-school-aged childcare is offered mostly by private not-for-profit and for-profit operators. There is much higher coverage for publicly delivered school-aged care than privately operated preschool.¹³
- Kindergarten is provincially operated and also functions as part-time childcare. In 2019-2020, 97% of eligible children in Newfoundland and Labrador attended full-day-kindergarten – while less than 40% of 2–4-year-olds attended a regulated group early childhood program.¹⁴
- The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development provides a free, universal Pre-Primary program to all 4-year-olds.¹⁵
- Indigenous governments already operate childcare programs in rural and remote communities throughout the province. The Nunatsiavut Government operates 4 licensed childcare centres, and Conne River Health and Social Services operates one.¹⁶

What about for-profit childcare?

It can be tempting to think that businesses could create spaces quickly where they are needed most. Countries like the United Kingdom, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Australia thought the same, and provided substantial public funds to private operators to expand. We can learn from their experience: for-profit childcare resulted in lower-quality childcare, and less choice for families as low-quality “big-box” childcare chains bought up smaller centers.¹⁷ In the United Kingdom, where for-profit operators control the supply of childcare, they have successfully lobbied for lax regulations around staff training and ratios of children to educators.

There are certainly individual for-profit childcare licensees who have provided high-quality programs in Newfoundland and Labrador, some for decades. In 2021, 70% of child care in the province was for-profit, and children, parents and communities would be lost if these spaces were to disappear.¹⁸ But providing funding for existing for-profit spaces is not the same as creating more for-profit spaces. Do not let for-profit advocates muddy the waters on this point.

¹² Childcare Resource and Research Unit, “How Publicly Delivered Child Care Services Contribute to Accessibility,” 8.

¹³ Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 6.

¹⁴ Akbari, McCuaig, and Foster, “Early Childhood Education Report 2020,” 10–12.

¹⁵ Beach et al., “Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada in 2021,” 50.

¹⁶ Beach et al., 11.

¹⁷ Friendly et al., “Risky Business: Child Care Ownership in Canada Past, Present and Future,” 46.

¹⁸ Beach et al., “Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada in 2021,” 11.

Pathway 4:

Create a Rural Childcare Strategy

NL has a rural population twice the Canadian average.¹⁹ In small communities, a lack of childcare is an issue that affects everyone. Over the past year, there have been reports of doctors, nurses, teachers and others leaving small communities because there is no childcare for their young children. According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, basically all communities under 30 000 people in Newfoundland and Labrador are child care deserts.²⁰

Some of these issues facing rural communities are similar to those facing the not-for-profit ELCC sector more generally. But most of these difficulties – not enough staff, not enough volunteer capacity for a Board of Directors – are magnified in rural communities.

Rural areas also pose specific, well-documented challenges to the standard models of childcare.¹²¹ Many parents work seasonally and during non-standard hours. Population density is low and the distances between communities are large. There is virtually no public transportation, and even families with a private vehicle might not be able to use it to access childcare – the car might be needed to get another family member to work.

Recommendations

The provincial government has committed to increasing the number of regulated childcare spaces in rural communities and the number of childcare spaces with flexible hours. Without a dedicated rural strategy led and supported by the provincial government, these spaces will not materialize.

- Develop a rural childcare strategy, informed by the challenges of European Union countries like Ireland and successes of countries like Norway and Denmark;²²
- Provide flexible and sufficient funding to rural childcare projects that reflects rural realities;
- Provide transportation funding for centres serving a wide catchment area so that bussing is included in parent fees.

Further Reading:

Friendly, Martha, Carolyn Ferns, Bethany Grady, and Laurel Rothman. "Child Care Can't Wait till the Cows Come Home: Rural Child Care in the Canadian Context." Occasional paper. Childcare Resource and Research Unit, September 2016.

Case Study: Community Education Network

The Community Education Network in Stephenville is host to a preschool program for 3–4-year-olds on the Port-Au-Port Peninsula. For years, transportation funding allowed the CEN to hire a local bus to pick up the children and bring them to preschool. The preschool consistently had over 20 children attending the program. The transportation funding was cut, and now just 10 of 23 eligible children attend.

¹⁹ Government of Canada, "Population Growth in Canada's Rural Areas, 2016 to 2021."

²⁰ Macdonald and Friendly, "Not Done Yet: \$10-a-Day Child Care Requires Addressing Canada's Child Care Deserts," 20.

²¹ Friendly et al., "Child Care Can't Wait: All the Cows Come Home: Rural Child Care in the Canadian Context."

²² Friendly et al., 47; Beach, "More than Spaces: Creating Universal Child Care in Norway."

Pathway 5:

Support Indigenous-led Early Learning and Child Care

The provincial government committed to increasing regulated childcare access for Indigenous children and families in 2021. Still, many programs operated by Indigenous governments and community organizations cannot access the Operating Grant Program (and provincial funding) because their facilities are not licensed. The main barriers to licensing are recruiting and retaining qualified staff and meeting facility standards (which can be more expensive in the rural and remote communities where most Indigenous people live).²³ Without provincial funding, Indigenous governments and community organizations struggle to provide the childcare services their children and communities need.

Even when facilities are licensed, certain childcare regulations make it difficult to run cultural-ly-based programs.²⁴ These include regulations limiting outdoor activities, having elders in the centres, and providing traditional foods. Educators are often stretched thin – with reports of educators in small communities working more than 12 hour shifts.²⁵

Although the provincial government has committed to developing an action plan in consultation with Indigenous governments, two years after federal funding started flowing to the province, there is much work to be done. There is a provincial ELCC Advisory Committee, who provides recommendations to the Minister of Education. At the time of writing, the committee did not have any Indigenous community representation..

This approach conflicts with the federal Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare Framework, which “points a way to a present and future where Indigenous peoples determine the programs and services their children need and where all Indigenous children grow up in an enriching environment that helps them meet their full potential.”²⁶

Recommendations:

When Indigenous communities choose childcare programs, they should have full funding and regulatory support to do so.

- Reform funding models and regulations to support Indigenous governments and community organizations who choose regulated child care
- Using a distinctions-based approach, ensure Indigenous representation on all committees related to ELCC policy

Further Reading:

Greenwood, M, R Larstone, and P Foster. “Exploring the Data Landscapes of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Children’s Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC).” Prince George, BC: National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, 2020.

²³ Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, PauktuuJt Inuit Women of Canada, and Tungasuvvingat Inuit, “Inuit Submission to Employment and Social Development Canada Regarding Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare Framework,” 19.

²⁴ First Voice, “Our Shared Vision: A Path toward Truth and Reconciliation in St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2023-33; an Urban Indigenous Community Action Plan,” 27.

²⁵ Provincial Indigenous Women’s Steering Commitee, “Hear Our Voices: MMIWG Policy Recommendations of the First Women of Newfoundland and Labrador,” 16.

²⁶ Employment and Social Development Canada, “Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework.”

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