

The Early Years Last a Lifetime

Proceedings Report
Early Learning in NL: Visioning Workshop

DRAFT

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Introduction

Under the auspices of the Jimmy Pratt Foundation, and in collaboration with the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation and the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development, Memorial University of Newfoundland, a day-long visioning workshop was held to help chart the course for a year-long public conversation on what quality early childhood learning could look like in the province.

Invited participants numbering 60 including a wide range of stakeholders either involved and/or interested in early childhood development, education, learning, and care and the future it holds in the province attended the workshop. The workshop was also streamed live on the internet.

Prior to the workshop, a Discussion Paper titled: The Early Years Last a Lifetime was circulated to participants, and a public lecture on the importance of early childhood education was delivered by the Honourable Margaret McCain at Memorial University the evening before.

Guest speakers and their presentations

As host of the workshop, Ms. Kathy Pratt Legrow, Chair, Jimmy Pratt Foundation, welcomed participants and guest speakers and provided the context for the workshop. She indicated that the previous day she and others had met with Premier Kathy Dunderdale, Honourable Clyde Jackman, Minister of Education, and Honourable Paul Davis, Minister of Child, Youth and Family Services, to present the Discussion Paper and seek the provincial government's participation in the year-long discussions planned for the province.

Kathy emphasized that the future of early childhood education and learning in the province could take many forms so it adequately addresses the needs of all communities, whether urban, rural, Aboriginal, etc.. She positioned that there needs to be a change in public policy to ensure future generations of children would not be disadvantaged by the lack of foresight by government and other key stakeholders. She also noted that other provinces such as Quebec and Prince Edward Island have been charting a new course in this field and showing promising results for children and their families, in particular for women and their ability to return to the workforce knowing that safe and effective early childhood services were in place. In summing up, Kathy called on all participants to assist in defining a vision and strategy for early childhood education and learning that we collectively could present to all three major political parties in the province to chart new public policy after the next provincial election, if not before.

Following on Kathy's remarks, Dr. Jane Betrand, Program Director for the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation, gave a presentation on the benefits of early childhood education (ECE). She emphasized the need to ensure equity of opportunity for all families and children through a planned province-wide approach to ECE that addresses the often chaos of services available to young families. She observed that the more policy is integrated under one ministry, and community services are integrated into one centre, the more efficient they become for the benefit of families and those funding the various array of services. Jane provided some examples of where this is working in Canada.

Jane outlined the key results of the [Early Years Study 3 Report \(2011\)](#) and showed how the provinces rated on a set of ECE performance criteria. The results showed NL as the worst performing province though she expected the results in the next study in 2014 to demonstrate more progress in NL due to recent investments by government. She then addressed herself to five key themes that make for an effective and inclusive ECE strategy: good governance, appropriate funding, universal access, quality learning environment, and accountability for results.

A copy of Jane's presentation is available on the Jimmy Pratt Foundation's website.

The next speaker, Ms. Verna Bruce, provided participants with the experience and insights she gained through her advocacy in introducing early years centres in Prince Edward Island and the implementation of a provincial early childhood education policy in the form of the *Pre-School Excellence Initiative*. The first step in PEI's policy was the introduction of kindergarten as a full-day program in the public school system. The next step has seen the provincial government invest substantially in a system that provides support to young children from birth to age four, their parents and their educators. She described PEI's approach as a 'revolution' resulting from a perfect storm of interests in improving ECE and political developments in the province.

Verna identified the critical elements that supported the 'revolution' in PEI's approach to ECE, namely (i) political will, with the advent of a new government, in their case; (ii) transfer of private kindergarten to the public school system; (iii) support for change within the provincial government bureaucracy; (iv) engagement of community stakeholders, recognizing that there was both support and resistance to change; (v) the influence of evidence and experts such as Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain on government officials; (vi) access to private foundation funding and partnerships to pilot new approaches; and (vii) a drop in skepticism by the school system. She said that certain challenges remain in terms of access, services for infants and the rate for the fees being charged. Verna concluded with her perspective that underlies her commitment to system change in this field: "we have to be a voice for those who have no voice".

A copy of Verna's presentation is available on the Jimmy Pratt Foundation's website.

The final morning speaker was Dr. David Philpott, Professor, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and member of the board of directors with the Jimmy Pratt Foundation. He provided an overview of why and how the Jimmy Pratt Foundation became interested in the issue of early childhood education and learning in the province, the process involved in getting to this point in the public discussion on the issues, and the value being achieved through the ongoing collaboration with the McCain Foundation and the Harris Centre in moving forward on the issues related to ECE in the province.

David reviewed the main elements of the Discussion Paper and some next steps being considered in bringing the public discussions to a conclusion by this time next year. His aim is to see a provincial strategy in place that could be adopted by all stakeholders including government. He further pointed out that his experience has told him that early intervention is critical if we are to minimize lost opportunities for our children as well as to lessen the demands on special education and other services downstream in a child's school years. He added that the input of today's workshop participants will be invaluable in guiding the discussions from here on in so that all interests are accommodated to the degree possible.

A copy of David's presentation is available on the Jimmy Pratt Foundation's website.

Following the presentations, the three speakers participated in a panel discussion involving all workshop participants. The discussion started with the panel addressing themselves to the question: what would be a child's perfect day in five years time after a provincial early childhood education and learning strategy was in full force in the province? The panel responded by visualizing a very supportive and inclusive system with potentially improved outcomes for the child, parents and the community at large.

Some of the key points raised by participants to be able to arrive at a much improved system in the province delivering on the identified improvements in outcomes were, as follows:

- ECE needs to be integrated into education planning, policy and new school design in the province
- ECE is seen as facilitating early screening, intervention and mitigation of/support for public health initiatives
- Community needs will be driving any needs assessment for ECE services
- All children and their families will have the opportunity to access ECE;
- There will have to be full inclusion, with the special needs of immigrant children fully incorporated
- There will have to be shared-care arrangements in place particularly for infants
- There will be common design principles for ECE services across the province
- There will be ongoing leadership
- There will no longer be a lack of ownership of the issues involved
- There will be a holistic approach to the issues
- The system will fully involve parents and address parental needs
- The system will normalize ECE as a mainstream approach to education and learning for children, and will be seamless when it comes to the working relations and transitions from the early child care system to the formal school system
- Finally, an effective ECE policy will allow for 'individualized' ECE.

The session ended with a question posed (but unanswered) by a participant: how does the system advocate to government for change?

Following the panel, participants were involved in their own group discussions that focused on three questions:

1. *What should be the critical elements of an effective and inclusive early learning strategy for the province?*
2. *Which key stakeholders have to be involved in designing and implementing this strategy, and what roles should they play?*
3. *What are some of the immediate next steps we need to take to see this strategy in place, and what would be the indicators of success?*

A summary of the key points raised in the discussion groups is presented in the following table. While the points do not always align across each column, the table is intended to capture the discussion as a whole as reported by the participants.

Critical elements of a NL strategy	Key stakeholders and roles	Next steps	Indicators of success
Universal programming with targeted interventions and parental choice	Children to be the focus of all planning and implementation	Establish a provincial steering committee and be deliberate in action(s)	An inclusive committee is established with appropriate supports
A clear cut mission statement	Children, parents, families and other key stakeholders to be consulted, involved in all aspects	Develop a child-focused strategy and/or plan that ensures all interests are reflected as well as builds on existing approaches	The strategy/plan is based on a one-policy approach
A supportive evaluation framework	Children, parents, families and other key stakeholders to be involved	Design an evaluation framework; conduct research including surveys, needs assessments, etc.	Measures of success are identified (e.g. return on investment in ECE is quantified)
Improve quality of ECE staff through increased education and training levels; highly trained staff are retained supported by good wages leading to 'professionalization of the profession'	Early childhood educators are consulted and trained	Post-secondary education system is equipped to meet training needs	Increased take-up in training programs
Affordable services; nutrition and transportation supports available as part of any new programs/services	Mothers' needs are addressed; fathers are present and actively involved; grandparents also involved	Consider having parental navigators in place along with parents advocacy organization to forge their collective voice	Families, newcomers, immigrants, returning NL families, have their expectations met
Varying contexts are understood when developing the strategy	Communities are consulted and engaged; community needs are assessed and services designed at community level	Develop inventory of existing programs, services, funding , infrastructure at community and provincial levels; identify gaps	Community needs are understood; inventory is prepared and vetted; gaps identified by experts
Public education and media campaign in place to 'amp it up'	School boards are engaged and ready to change; employers and municipalities are supportive	Public campaign that promotes new approach but is also able to pre-empt negative criticisms	The 'ask' of the public and government is ready and clearly articulated; public understands, conversant on need for change
	Professional and business associations, unions are engaged and supportive		Key messages resonate with all stakeholders (e.g. focus shifts from day care to early learning)
	Child care operators, family resource centres, others are engaged and supported as changes designed and implemented		More copies of discussion paper are downloaded; more conversations held; the three provincial political parties show interest in new approaches
A single ministry or department to integrate any new strategy	Government is engaged and supportive; ready to enact and invest in new approaches	Have all policy and programming under one provincial department	Various provincial strategies and resources are linked through this strategy
Outreach (e.g. to vulnerable families) and ensure access by non-working families	Child/family psychologists, social workers, behavioral specialists, others are incorporated in new system		Current waitlists for child care services are eliminated
Leadership in place and champions identified who are ready to step up		Be ready for any and all opportunities to move the agenda forward	Intended results achieved

Wrap-up

Following the reports delivered by each of the discussion groups, Mr. Mike Clair, Associate Director of Public Policy with the Harris Centre, provided some summary comments on the results achieved for the day as well as outlined some plans for the coming year. He noted three public lectures are being planned for early in 2014 that will bring external experts in three specific fields to the province with the intent to inform as well as move the early learning and childhood education agenda forward. In that regard, the Harris Centre will be providing support to engage the public across the province consistent with its role and mandate. Mike also indicated that as a result of today's discussions various committees will have to be established to develop elements of a provincial strategy, and there will be a call for volunteers to support this work.

Kathy Pratt Legrow thanked all participants for their attendance and participation in the visioning workshop. She commented that as a group we have set a daunting task for ourselves but that with ongoing collaboration and commitment to change there is an opportunity to be successful. Kathy commented that we are at the start of a year-long discussion with the goal to have a new strategy designed and supported by key stakeholders that the political parties could consider in their election platforms leading to the 2015 provincial election. That being said, Kathy reminded participants that as a foundation, the Jimmy Pratt Foundation could not be seen or act as political advocates, but the foundation would lend support to any process focused on public policy change that was seen as not political or partisan. She closed by thanking the organizers for the workshop.

As facilitator for the workshop, John G. Abbott indicated that a proceedings report would be drafted and shared with all participants for feedback. The final proceedings report will be posted on the Jimmy Pratt Foundation website.