



## **STAKEHOLDER FOCUS GROUP REPORT**

*Draft Messages for a Discussion Paper  
Early Childhood Education in Newfoundland and Labrador*

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## ***Introduction***

The Jimmy Pratt Foundation is a private family foundation established in 2010 that contributes to projects and programs that support a healthy, inclusive and resilient society while helping at-risk youth. Childhood resilience is its main focus, particularly for the advancement, collaboration and dissemination of research to educate the community and inform intervention.

The Foundation is a member of the Early Child Development Funders Working Group (ECD-FWG). The ECD-FWG is many things: a cross-Canada learning network; a deeply shared commitment to children; and a link among eight very diverse foundations. The shared goal is simple – the availability of quality, publicly funded, early childhood education for every child from the age of two.

The Jimmy Pratt Foundation is currently in the process of developing a discussion paper to encourage productive dialogue about what the desired elements of early childhood education should be for Newfoundland and Labrador. Thus, the two-hour focus group held in St. John's was designed to gather stakeholder feedback about possible messages in a discussion paper. The messages were grouped into the following sections:

1. The provincial landscape
2. The impact of the early years
3. The case for investment
4. The current NL situation (current strategy)
5. What is required?

## **The Process**

Eighteen stakeholders participated in the focus group. Participants represented:

- Community-based agencies that service the needs of children, youth and their families
- Early childhood educators
- University and college system representatives
- Policy makers and influencers
- Community development professionals and consultants
- Other interested individuals with a special interest in early childhood education

It is interesting to note many participants also identified themselves as being parents of young children.

An independent facilitator guided the focus group and gathered comments based upon potential messages that had been drafted. Members of the writing team were located in a neighbouring room and listened in on the focus group proceedings via a Skype connection. Participants were assured the goal of the focus group was to obtain commentary about the key messages necessary in a discussion paper, and that no effort was being focused on recording “who said what”.

What follows are the messages, cautions and comments that participants, as a group, feel should be reflected in a discussion paper on early childhood education. It is based upon the full group discussion and individual, written comments that were collected.

### ***Tone of the Discussion Paper***

Participants believe the discussion paper should be positively framed, building upon assets rather than deficits. In other words, promoting discussion about the benefits of investing in early childhood education was felt to foster a more productive discussion. This is very much different than discussion about the potential negative impacts of unavailable or inaccessible early childhood education.

Participants also noted that:

- Inclusive language should be consistently used (e.g., parents, family members and other care givers versus only mothers)
- Clear and simple language should be used with terms defined as necessary to ensure clarity
- Enabling messages should prevail over “return-on-investment” messages, though the latter are acknowledged to be of greater importance to some audiences, especially policy makers

### ***The Provincial Landscape***

Stakeholders acknowledge that it is important to link the opportunity to invest in early childhood education with the economic opportunities and challenges that currently exist in the province. However, it is perhaps more important to focus on the benefits to the child versus the benefits to the province in addressing its workforce attachment and labour force challenges. For example, it was suggested that the key opportunity to

convey might be, “At this time of great prosperity, we have the opportunity to invest in our children in a way that was not possible before now.”

Of particular importance is the need to define and differentiate early childhood education and full-time kindergarten, as these terms are not interchangeable. It was noted that best-practice early childhood education is best understood as existing in a continuum, with full-time kindergarten often being recognized as an important component.

### ***The Impact of the Early Years***

Of critical importance is ensuring messages do not in any way attribute blame to parents and caregivers for their caregiving skills. Here again, an asset-based versus a deficit-based approach to messaging will be important. Participants believe every child benefits from early childhood education: not just children who experience social, emotional, physical and economic challenges.

Participants also noted it will be important to present defensible facts in a compelling way. These facts should ignite the case for action. Diagrams can be used to augment text and to convey messages. The phrase, “The early years last a lifetime” appeared to resonate particularly well with participants.

### ***The Case for Investment***

Participants acknowledged that a case for investment must be strong for policy makers: a case that is focused on return-for-investment and which is realized over the longer term. However, for broader audiences, messages should convey the benefit to the individual child. Indeed, there was a strong sentiment expressed that this focus might be one of the first messages of the discussion paper.

Participants also noted that a mind shift must occur with respect to the level of standards that are appropriate. Early childhood educators should not be considered babysitters, but rather as professionals who are positively impactful in the lives of children. A message should be included in the discussion paper that high standards serve to promote high quality early childhood education experiences.

## ***The NL Provincial Situation***

Participants believe a strong message that Newfoundland and Labrador falls far behind most other provinces must be conveyed, but in a way that promotes constructive action. While comparisons of Newfoundland and Labrador with Atlantic Canada are appropriate, so too are comparisons with other provinces. It was noted many of our residents are familiar with the array of early childhood education services available in Alberta.

## ***What is Required?***

The following message positively resonated with participants:

*NL can act now to help all its children succeed, by providing:*

- *Full day kindergarten for all 5 year olds;*
- *Full day preschool for 4 year olds; and*
- *Fast tracking its (provincial) child care plan to 2016 (versus 2022)*

Other messages that could be considered include:

- How social and economic development are linked and how investments in early childhood education contribute to both social and economic benefits
- Waiting for ten years to realize the goals of the province's 2012-2022 Strategy for Quality, sufficient and Affordable Child Care in Newfoundland and Labrador is too long to wait. Too much is at risk
- The Quebec experience in early childhood education is expensive, but it has an economic return (for every \$1.00 invested there is an economic benefit of \$1.05 realized, and in the year that the spending takes place). Though just \$.05 in realized benefit, it is nonetheless a benefit that exceeds the investment cost
- The province, through its university tuition policy is a leader, since it had the courage to make this strategic decision. It can also be a leader in making the required investments in early childhood education

## ***Next Steps***

Participants were thanked by representatives of the Jimmy Pratt Foundation for their participation in the focus group. It was noted their feedback, both verbal and through

their written comments, will be used by writing team for the discussion paper. The paper will be released at a public symposium in November and also placed on the Foundation's website. Today's focus group participants will also be invited to the November symposium.