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*Quality early learning programs benefit children,
families and communities*

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THE EARLY YEARS LAST A LIFETIME

A DISCUSSION PAPER

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This paper was prepared by the Jimmy Pratt Foundation in partnership with the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation and the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

The **Jimmy Pratt Foundation** is a private family foundation established in 2010 to support projects and programs that promote a healthy, inclusive and resilient society while helping youth at risk. In keeping with their mission, they encourage the advancement of the health, education, and security of children from birth to 18 years of age, and their families. The Jimmy Pratt Foundation is a member of the Early Child Development Funders Working Group, a group of philanthropic foundations from across the country whose goal is to increase the availability of quality, publicly-funded, early childhood education for every child in Canada.

The **Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation** invests to inform public policy benefiting young children and their families. Its mission is to champion effective early childhood programs across Canada that provide equal opportunities for all children, align with the school system, and operate within a provincial or territorial framework.

The **Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development** has two primary goals: to assist in the responsible development of the economy and society of Newfoundland and Labrador, and to stimulate informed discussion on important provincial issues. A key part of Memorial University, the Harris Centre helps diverse groups and individuals connect with the research resources of Memorial through teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

“Early childhood learning is about much more than school-readiness; it is about life readiness”

Canadian Council on Learning

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1.0 Preamble

The early years last a lifetime. The first five years of a child’s life are the most critical time of growth and learning. In fact, 85% of the human brain is developed by the time a child graduates kindergarten.ⁱ Nutrition, the physical environment, and love, care and attention are all factors that affect how a child experiences daily life and how the brain grows.

Children’s earliest experiences matter deeply. Children have a right to the best possible childhood. They have a right to enjoy their daily lives in healthy and secure spaces and places. They have a right to high-quality, inclusive, and fun early learning environments that encourage investigation and promote exploration and play. In these environments, children communicate their thoughts, feelings, experiences, information and opinions. They ask questions, and learn to understand themselves and others.ⁱⁱ

Quality early learning experiences in stimulating and nurturing environments are associated with better outcomes for children throughout their life. Children who consistently attend quality early learning programs are shown to have improved self-confidence and self-esteem, better health, creativity and social skills. They show enhanced problem-solving and perseverance, and tend to be more successful in school and in the workplace. Consequently, they are more engaged citizens and become more productive members of their communities. In contrast, gaps in these early learning experiences can negatively impact all aspects of a child’s life.

Research also shows that public investment in effective early learning programs produces benefits for children, families, communities and society that far outweigh the costs.ⁱⁱⁱ A range of quality, inclusive early learning options for young children is part of a healthy and efficient community infrastructure.

This paper is intended to spark informed discussion on the value of a comprehensive, integrated and inclusive early learning strategy for the province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). Our current range of programs and services must be enhanced, expanded and integrated if all our children are going to have the foundation needed for success in life. The information presented is based on current literature, research and practice, and stakeholder/expert input from NL and across the country.

Quality early learning isn’t about young children sitting at desks. Young children’s exploration of the world through play in stimulating environments, with adults and other children, provides them with opportunities they need to grow and develop. High-quality early learning begins with qualified, professional and caring educators who help to create the safe, rich and rewarding environments in which children thrive and where families are supported and valued as their children’s first teachers.^{iv}

Well-trained educators:

- know how young children learn
- work with the children to build stimulating, creative activities
- help children resolve their conflicts, and
- help parents to support their children’s learning at home.

Early learning can be fostered in many settings including home environments, individual child care arrangements, public or private child care centres, family resource centres, pre-school programs/junior kindergarten, and kindergarten. For the purposes of this discussion paper, we use the term "early learning" to include quality experiences in this continuum of settings.

Quality early learning environments:

- nurture children
- individualize attention
- appreciate each child’s uniqueness
- enable friendships
- provide new experiences, and
- promote development of new skills.

We envision a “seamless” delivery of high-quality and accessible early learning opportunities which avoids disruptions among different sites and between child care and kindergarten, making both the child’s and the parents’ day less stressful. As a bonus, seamless programs are more affordable for parents and taxpayers.



2.0 What is early learning?

3. Early Learning is a Wise Investment

Having access to a range of high-quality, affordable and inclusive early learning opportunities is beneficial for children and parents, as well as the broader economy.

In addition to building children's fundamental skills, early learning programs can help identify learning or developmental delays at an early stage, and provide children and parents with appropriate support. Not only does early detection allow a child to receive specialized help sooner, it also helps to prevent issues from intensifying and having to be addressed at a later age, which could prove to be a bigger, more costly challenge.^v

In 2010, Ontario launched a five-year plan to turn half-day kindergarten into full day for 4 and 5 year-olds. After only two years, program evaluations are showing an overall drop in developmental delays by 7%. Delays in language and cognitive development have plummeted a stunning 75% and risks in the areas of social competence and communication skills have been reduced by half.^{vi}

The development that takes place in a high-quality early learning environment helps children to be better prepared for, and transition more easily into, school. Studies show that children who enter kindergarten with confidence, enthusiasm and a higher skill set generally experience fewer grade repetitions, lower dropout rates, and higher post-secondary attendance than those who enter the school system with vulnerabilities.^{vii}

In contrast, children who start kindergarten behind their peers often go on to join the 25% of school-aged children who require special education. They become the secondary school students identified with low math and science scores on international assessments. They reach adulthood with literacy challenges that make it difficult for them to hold a job, support a family, and contribute to their communities.

Research by leading economists around the world links investment in early childhood development with economic prosperity, productivity and competitiveness for both the individual and society.^{viii} Building human capital through better educated children means NL's future workforce will be more highly skilled – an important fact considering that changes in demographics are resulting in a shortage of skilled workers. Moreover, workers will be more productive/innovative and earn higher wages, while boosting the overall standard of living in the province.

Quality early learning environments also support parents to enter or return to the labour force, upgrade their skills, achieve work-life balance, deepen their connections with their communities, and provide their children with greater opportunities.^{ix} Such advantages are particularly significant for families living on low income and/or those led by single parents.

Changing families, changing needs

We know that families are changing, communities are changing and economies are changing. The average number of children per family has decreased from 2.7 in 1961 to 1.9 in 2011.^x There is more pressure for both parents to work to ensure their family's financial viability and respond to their communities' economic demands.

The number of women employed in Canada^{xi} has increased dramatically since the 1970s, rising from 54% in 1975 to 82% in 2009 for women in their prime working years (ages 25–44).

In 2009, the proportion of employed women with pre-school-aged children was less than the proportion of employed women with school-aged children: 66.5% of women with children under age 6 were employed, compared with 78.5% of those whose youngest child was aged 6 to 15.

The presence of young children also has a greater impact on the employment of lone mothers. In 2009, 45.9% of lone mothers with children under age 3 were employed, compared with 66.5% of mothers in two-parent families with children under age 3.

In 2009, nearly 7 out of 10 part-time workers were women. Among women ages 25 to 44 who were working part-time in 2009, 35% said they were doing so in order to care for their children. Although today we live in fluid communities and economies, child care responsibilities still remain predominantly a woman's responsibility.^{xiv}

Quebec launched its early childhood program in 1998. This year it expects that all families who want a space for their child will have one.^{xii} Quebec's program is expensive but it more than pays for itself and has created other important social and economic spinoffs. For example, women now dominate enrolment in post-secondary education; Quebec leads Canada in female labour force participation (70,000 more mothers are working due to available, low cost early learning); and fathers have the highest rate of paternity leave. Further, due to increased workforce participation, there has been a 50% decrease in family poverty and a five billion dollar increase in Quebec's gross domestic product.^{xvii}

Access to affordable, inclusive child care would facilitate women's participation in the labour force. It could shorten their time out of the labour market following childbirth, enable more to move from part-time to full-time employment, and decrease their career interruptions. This would afford women more financial independence, increasing their lifetime earnings and decreasing their chances of poverty.^{xv}

Public investment on early learning produces significantly higher benefits than spending on elementary, secondary, post-secondary education or adult job training.

Every dollar invested in early learning increases the economy's output by at least \$2.54^{xvi}

Early education and care is a top job creator. For example, \$1 million spent on early childhood education creates 10 times more jobs than an equal investment in the manufacturing or resource sectors.^{xiii}

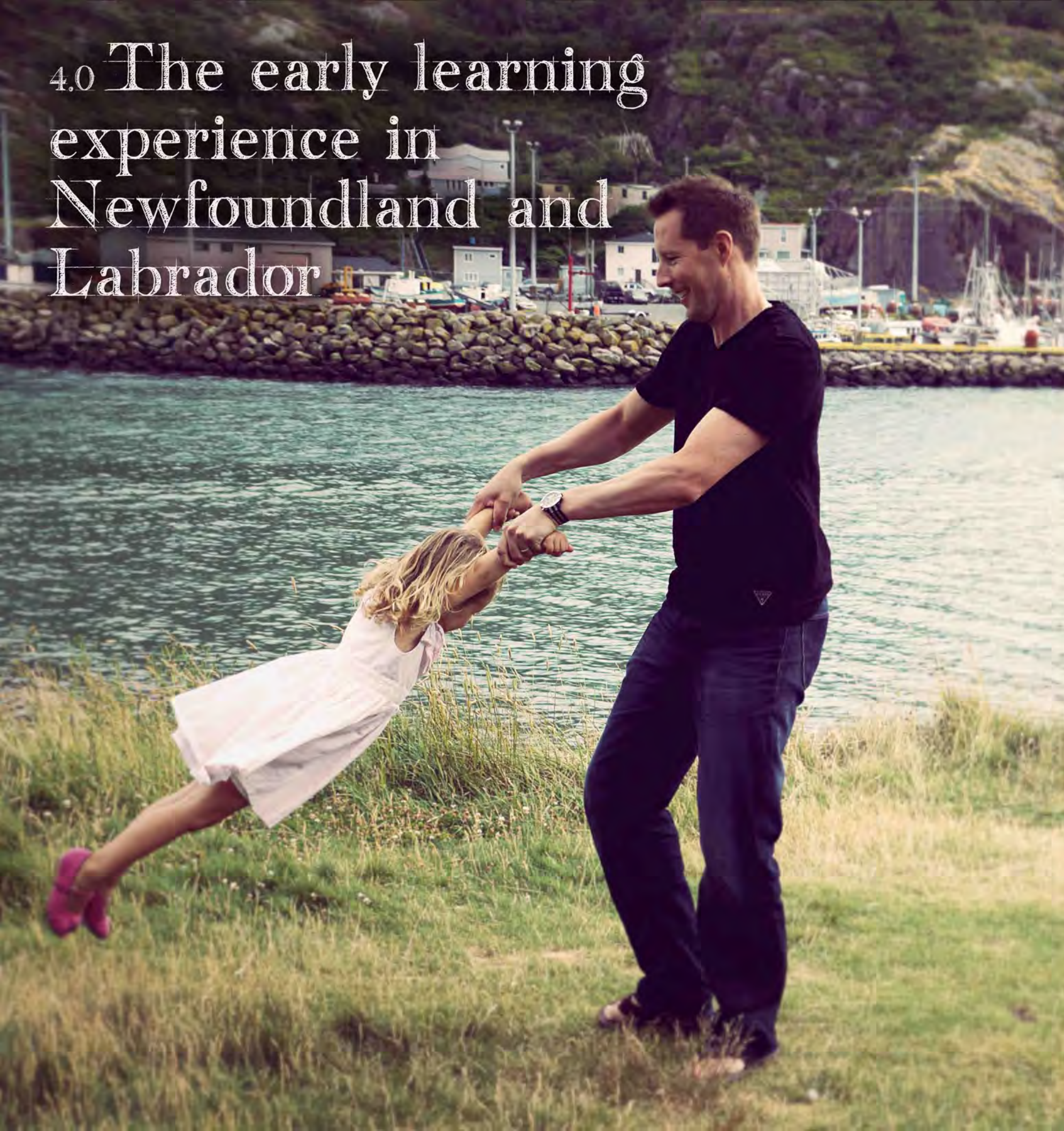
Parents are able to work, sending money back in tax revenues.

Employment insurance, income assistance and other social costs are reduced.

Early learning programs on their own cannot overcome the negative impacts of the many social and economic challenges individuals and families face in this rapidly evolving technological world. No single program can. However, early learning programs can and do greatly improve children's quality of life and developmental outcomes while producing other social and economic benefits for them, their families and communities, and society.



4.0 The early learning experience in Newfoundland and Labrador



Despite the body of research on the many benefits of early learning, our children do not have access to a comprehensive and integrated range of quality early learning programs. In 2012, there were approximately 29,800 children from birth to five years of age in NL. While almost 60% of these children have mothers in the labour force, there are licensed child care spaces for only 19%. This represents a significant gap given that availability of quality child care is directly linked to the labour market choices of parents, particularly mothers.

Currently, the government of NL has two distinct strategies: one for early learning and one for early childhood education.

In 2011, the province announced funding to advance a provincial early childhood learning strategy - *Learning from the Start*, led by the Department of Education. The initial focus is on the birth to three years period with a specific focus on supporting parents and the important role they play in their children's early development and learning. To date, approved initiatives have included an early childhood learning curriculum framework, parent resources, early literacy programming, and a promotional campaign focusing on the early years and play-based learning.^{xviii}

Caring for Our Future: Provincial Strategy for Quality, Sufficient and Affordable Child Care in Newfoundland and Labrador, 2012–2022 is the province's plan to improve early childhood education. This initiative is led by a separate department - the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services. It calls for doubling NL's \$22.2-million child care budget by 2022 and improved policy oversight. It also speaks to better pay to recruit and retain Early Childhood Educators, grants for operators to create more child care spaces, and more affordable parent fees.^{xix}

In May 2010, the Government of Prince Edward Island launched the Preschool Excellence Initiative - a five-year plan to phase in broad and significant changes to the early childhood education and care system. The initiative included the largest, onetime increase in funding for early childhood education and care in the history of the province. The Early Childhood Education Index 2011 ranked Prince Edward Island second in Canada.^{xx}

In contrast to such dual approaches, our Atlantic Canada neighbours are streamlining their early learning programs. They are developing quality and efficient multi-service children's centres that are providing easier access to early learning for children and their families. In contrast, NL's approach to early learning remains fragmented.

Across Canada 80% of five year olds enjoy the benefits of full day kindergarten.

Compared to our neighbours, NL spends the least on early learning and our Early Childhood Educators are among the lowest paid in the country. Unlike our neighbours, NL does not offer full day kindergarten. It is important to note that NL ranked last among the ten provinces in the Early Childhood Education Index 2011, which provides a snapshot of provincial early learning services.^{xxi}

Even if the government of NL meets all of its current child care and early learning commitments by 2021–2022, our provincial ranking will remain low. Ten years is too long to wait for the development of an integrated early learning strategy. We will lose two more generations of pre-schoolers during that period. We can close the developmental gap by investing in quality early learning now. Given NL's current prosperity, unparalleled in our province's history, we are in a position to take action.

Our province is experiencing historic growth and affluence. More people in the province are working than ever before, and this job growth is expected to continue. People are moving to take advantage of the new job opportunities. Housing starts are up, business is growing, and more immigrants are making NL their home. However, with this growth come significant challenges.

Rapid urbanization with its higher housing and living costs requires families with two earners. Out-migration takes away our younger and skilled workers, often leaving one parent behind to manage. Internal migration, as workers move throughout the province, also breaks the social and child care networks traditionally offered by extended families. These are all recent and unique changes in NL's society, which challenge outdated systems and necessitate new models for early learning.

Our rapid expansion is coming on the heels of serious demographic change, which risks negatively affecting the province's economic growth. Labour force growth is a key component in economic growth^{xxii} but it is not the only factor. As competition for labour stiffens between provinces and countries, decisions are increasingly made based on place and the attractiveness of the community: it is no longer enough to only offer employment. Today's workers are highly mobile and flexible, and employment is but one factor determining where they choose to live.^{xxiii} For workers who have children, access to a quality education system, which includes quality early learning programs, is another critical factor.

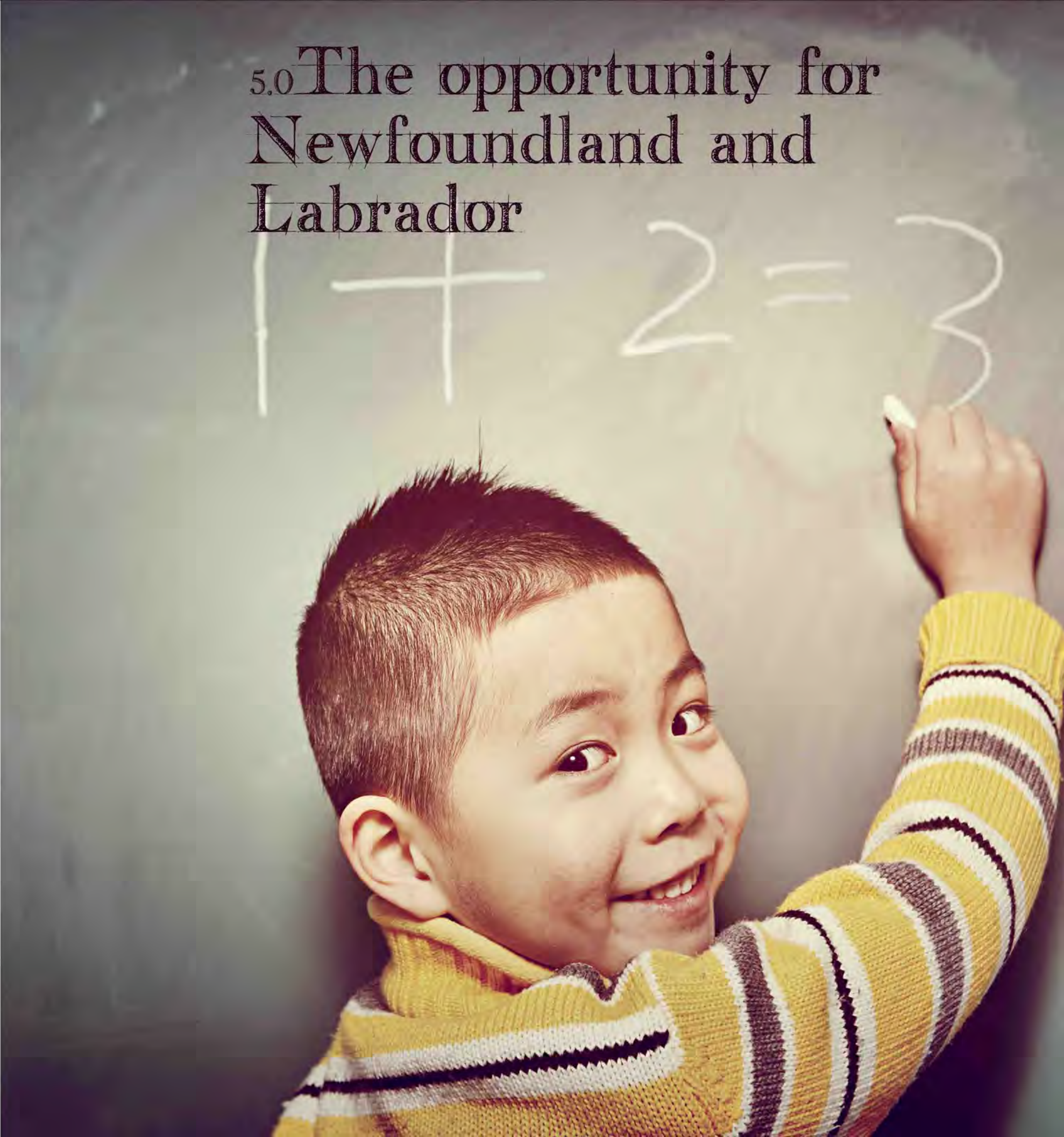
At this time of increased prosperity, NL has the enviable opportunity to create a better future for all our citizens by investing in an early learning strategy – one that contributes to building inclusive communities that leave no one behind. We could choose the status quo and hope that our helping systems (the schools, social and health services) will be able to cope, even though they tell us they are having increasing difficulty meeting the existing demand. We can hope that children will "grow out of" behaviour and learning problems that were set in early life, even though evidence suggests that when unaddressed, such issues prevent children from reaching their full potential. We can put more money into policing and correctional systems and other special services, although that will be expensive and unlikely to make a big difference.^{xxiv} We can continue on our current path and remain as having the poorest ranked early learning opportunities in Canada.

Alternatively, NL can capitalize on its prosperity and act now to help all its children succeed by providing:

- Full day kindergarten for all 5 year olds;
- Full day preschool for all 4 year olds;
- And by fast tracking its child care plan to full implementation by 2016 (versus 2022).

This activity should be delivered under an integrated administrative and governance framework, i.e., early learning strategies and programming should be consolidated under one provincial government department.

5.0 The opportunity for Newfoundland and Labrador





6.0 A new vision for early learning in Newfoundland and Labrador

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Creating a successful integrated early learning strategy from NL's current service patchwork demands strong leadership. It requires effective and efficient policies that meet individual, social, cultural, and economic objectives. It requires the integration of services through collaboration at all levels. It requires a commitment to quality in early learning.

The future of children born in NL tomorrow will be shaped by the decisions we make today. From this generation will come community leaders who will play a critical role in determining NL's future health, economic prosperity and sustainability. The path we take today will determine their future and ours.

A child's early learning indeed does last a lifetime.

NOTES

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