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The Honourable Dr. Andrew Furey,
M.H.A. Humber-Gros Morne
Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador

An Open Letter to the Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador to follow the research and expand the education system to include four-year-olds

Dear Premier:

The Jimmy Pratt Foundation calls on your government to expand public education to include Junior Kindergarten for all four-year-olds, fully integrated within the existing school system. Leveraging Newfoundland and Labrador's educational infrastructure and public management will ensure that every young child has access to a stable, inclusive learning environment—building on proven models in Ontario, Nova Scotia, and the Northwest Territories.

With 79% of young children in Newfoundland and Labrador living in childcare deserts¹, the need for accessible early learning is urgent, especially in rural, Indigenous, and immigrant communities. Establishing Junior Kindergarten within public schools would provide a sustainable, affordable solution, ensuring no family is left behind and allowing parents to remain in the workforce with the support they need.

Research indicates that expanding early education to include Junior Kindergarten is a powerful lever for poverty reduction and economic growth. As highlighted in the 2023 Child Poverty Report Card, affordable, reliable early education allows parents—particularly women—to participate in the workforce, thereby increasing family incomes and reducing poverty. The economic returns are profound: greater workforce participation, reduced social service costs, and increased tax revenues.²

By signing the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement in 2021³ your government has been able to add spaces, create a wage grid, and a partial benefits package to help address the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators. The current Pre-Kindergarten Pilot Program falls short. Serving fewer than 20% of eligible four-year-olds, it remains outside the public school system, managed by third-party operators, and requires fees that exclude many families. Recruitment struggles limit capacity further, especially for rural and Indigenous communities. It requires a third-party operator to manage, as well as costly renovations to the school to become compliant with existing child care regulations.⁴ To date, your government has opened 34 Pre-Kindergarten program locations, for 600 of the over 4000 four-year-olds in the province.⁵ These barriers underscore the need for a universal Junior Kindergarten program fully integrated within the public system. Even with the recent

Call for Expressions to open 12 additional locations,⁶ your government will likely not reach target of more than 3,000 Pre-Kindergarten spaces in communities by March 31, 2026.⁷ \$10 a day child care and Pre-Kindergarten still elude many of our families.

The impact of this is significant. Everyone is dependent on someone who is dependent on child care. The longer young children wait for early learning and child care, the more they are held back, especially marginalized children. Young couples are rethinking having children as the province experiences one of the lowest fertility rates in the country⁸. Parents cannot return to work. Grandparents have to help raise their grandchildren. Employers are struggling with labour shortages, slowing economic growth. This is impacting all aspects of life in this province.

Waiting until 2026 to evaluate the pilot program would delay solutions for families and communities, intensifying the province's economic and demographic challenges. Families without early learning access face barriers to workforce participation, while young couples are rethinking parenthood, risking further population decline and economic stagnation. Immediate action to implement universal Junior Kindergarten would directly support families and secure Newfoundland and Labrador's future.

A universal, school-based Junior Kindergarten program is the most effective solution to address accessibility, inclusion, and quality. **The 2017 Task Force on Education strongly recommended this approach⁹, and results in Ontario and Nova Scotia highlight its success.** Junior Kindergarten programs in these provinces have boosted literacy, social skills, and behavioral regulation, reduced special education needs, and improved long-term outcomes—particularly critical for Newfoundland and Labrador's high-demand early learning landscape.

Nova Scotia's Junior Kindergarten (Pre-Primary) model is an excellent example¹⁰ of an inclusive and well-supported program for four-year-olds, providing benefits such as:

- Boosted literacy, academic, and social skills;
- Boosted behavioral regulation and reduced special education needs;
- Lowered family stress and enhanced family finances as mothers re-enter the workforce.

The model's strengths lie in its universal, free-to-families approach, play-based curriculum, integration within the school culture, school-bus access, and wraparound before- and after-school programs that support children's stability and parents' work schedules.

Four-year-olds, especially marginalized students, benefit from the expertise of school staff and services, the stability of the school, inclusive supports and expertise, and being with older siblings. Teaching styles, play-based pedagogy, and curriculum frameworks align and provide a learning continuum, resulting in better academic, social and economic outcomes¹¹. The existing infrastructure

and the stability of schools, already in many communities, adapt existing space for younger children, especially in communities with partially empty school buildings.

Parents and educators widely recognize that Junior Kindergarten provides a valuable boost to children's development, is a vital support to young families, and frees up space in early learning and child care centers for younger children.

The current Pre-Kindergarten Pilot Program has failed to meet Newfoundland and Labrador's needs. In three years, it:

- Provides spaces for less than 20% of four-year-olds;
- Charges a fee, limiting accessibility;
- Is managed by third-party operators, separating it from the public school system;
- Requires unnecessary, costly renovations for childcare compliance.

Evidence overwhelmingly shows that this model cannot effectively support Newfoundland and Labrador's families and communities. Even if it is expanded, the overwhelming evidence indicates it is the wrong model.

Making the right investment in the right type of program at this time is even more urgent given the post-pandemic gaps reported in many jurisdictions, including Canada.¹² A better Junior Kindergarten program is needed and is readily available.

Implementing public Junior Kindergarten requires investment, but evidence from other provinces shows that these are manageable challenges with well-documented, worthwhile outcomes. Your government committed to this approach in 2017 before pivoting to the pilot program in 2021. We urge you to realign with this proven approach and ensure that every child in Newfoundland and Labrador receives the high-quality early learning they deserve.

In 2023, the Jimmy Pratt Foundation emphasized the critical need to follow the evidence in support of public Junior Kindergarten.¹³ The data remains clear and compelling: publicly funded, universally accessible early childhood education delivers measurable returns on investment through improved school readiness, higher workforce participation, and poverty reduction. Children in Newfoundland and Labrador deserve the same level of opportunity afforded to those in Nova Scotia, Ontario, and the Northwest Territories, for example. By prioritizing a province-wide, publicly funded Junior Kindergarten, we can provide Newfoundland and Labrador's youngest residents with an equitable start and contribute to the long-term resilience of our communities.

The Jimmy Pratt Foundation has a long history of working with Government and community groups to advance positive, evidence-based systems change, including Full-day Kindergarten. We are well-positioned and eager to support all initiatives to advance a proven Junior Kindergarten model.

Premier Furey, an inclusive and universal Junior Kindergarten program is not only an educational investment—it is a commitment to equitable growth, benefiting families, supporting communities, and empowering Newfoundland and Labrador’s workforce. In your recent address, you emphasized the need for bold action¹⁴ ; there is no step more impactful than securing a prosperous future for our province’s youngest learners. Let’s work together to make this vision a reality for every child and family. Please do this for our children, for our families, for our schools, and for our economy.

Sincerely,

The Jimmy Pratt Foundation

Cc. The Honourable Krista Howell, M.H.A. St. Barbe, L’Anse Aux Meadows, Minister of Education

1 <https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2023/05/not-done-yet.pdf>, pg.4

2 https://www.childcarepolicy.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/AFFORDABLE-FOR-ALL_Full-Report_Final.pdf

3 <https://www.gov.nl.ca/releases/2021/exec/0728n08/>

4 <https://www.gov.nl.ca/releases/2021/exec/0728n08/>

5 <https://www.gov.nl.ca/releases/2022/education/0621n01/>

6 <https://www.gov.nl.ca/releases/2022/education/0621n01/>

7 <https://www.gov.nl.ca/releases/2022/education/0621n01/>

8 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240925/dq240925c-eng.html>

9 https://www.gov.nl.ca/education/files/task_force_report.pdf. See Recommendations 62-65.

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https://mwmccain.ca/_media/uploads/atlantic_initiative/expanding_public_ed_to_include_4yo_children_-_overview.pdf

11 IBID, p.2.

12 <https://theconversation.com/pandemic-babies-developmental-milestones-not-as-bad-as-we-feared-but-not-as-good-as-before-204785>

13 <https://jimmyprattfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/JPF-Roadmap-2023.pdf>

14 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnmsqaAtFIA>