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Expanding Public Education to Include Four-Year-Old Children

Common Concerns About Junior Kindergarten

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My neighborhood school is full and there is no space for the 4-year-olds.

Capacity is always a concern, especially in urban areas. Therefore, other province opted to phase it in over a couple of years to deal with capacity issues, starting in rural areas where ample space exists. There is more space in some urban schools than most people realize, as is illustrated by some already offering programs for 4-year-olds. This is because some schools can repurpose rooms currently used for other reasons. There are always a few schools where space is a challenge. For example, in NS a few schools had to use another site before being able to move into the same building, but they eventually got there. Some schools are using mobile classrooms to address capacity issues. Those sites are often more suitable for the younger children, since they often provide their own washrooms and allow for quick access to the outside. (Evidently, mobile classrooms are no longer what they used to be.) Every region with a junior kindergarten program successfully worked through these challenges.

Primary teachers aren't trained in play-based learning.

This is absolutely correct. Primary teachers have little training in play-based learning and do not understand or appreciate it. This is why bringing trained ECE's into the K-12 environment is so critical. These professionals model effective play-based learning and it rubs off on the staff. It is actually called "playification of schools" versus "schoolification of play". NL saw this with full-day kindergarten. Once primary teachers witnessed play-based learning in action, they started to use some of the strategies (e.g. children are now outside much more often). NS is experiencing the same thing and are working to have principals assume leadership over JK to infuse it into the curriculum planning of the school.

The current pre-kindergarten program keeps the children longer and they stay for the summer, which parents need.

Parents need the same care for all of their children up to age 12. It is actually not an argument to keep the 4-year-olds out but to support the school in providing additional care. ON mandated schools to offer before- and after-school programs, either delivered by them or contracted to a provider. School becomes a one-stop-shop for all children. In NL's current model, a family with a 4-year-old and a 6-year-old have two completely different afterschool and summer programs. In a JK model they all stay at the school and the parents do not have to worry about it. More importantly, there are

less disruptions for children. Contractors providing after-school programs are more financially stable and quickly catch on to the market for summer school programs. If a neighborhood school can stay open during July and August for the pre-kindergarten program, it is possible to use the space for summer programs for the older children. Schools are a community's

greatest resource in meeting the needs of children and families. NL's pre-kindergarten model works for the few kids who get it but is a nightmare when dealing with older siblings.

It will empty the childcare centers that we need open.

Pulling the 4-year-olds out of the childcare equation frees significant space which, in every other jurisdiction, is instantly filled by desperate families. NS, ON, NWT, and QC still have wait lists, but they are much more reasonable. With NL's wait list this is absolutely the fastest way toward expansion. In many rural communities, it is the only way to childcare, since populations are so small that no model of child care is viable.

There will be an exodus of ECE's to the school system and centers will close.

When ECE positions become available in the school system, some (not all) ECE's jump at the chance for better pay, benefits and working conditions. What has happened in every other jurisdiction is a strengthening of the sector by making it more stable, with career advancement opportunities. It provides a career ladder and has encouraged many ECE's to return to school and complete education degrees (e.g. the demand has led to UNB offering a 2+2 bachelor's degree that certifies ECE's to teach in primary). The ECE sector needs to be strengthened through transfer options, career laddering, and promotion possibilities. As a result, ECEs return to the sector and more students enrol in ECE training programs.

Is junior kindergarten better than quality ECE in a regulated center?

There is no research indicating that play-based learning in a JK environment is better than in a quality centre. It has never been a point of discussion. What we are saying is that it is a fast way to address the space issue; it allows a smoother transition to schools; it establishes relationships between schools and families (especially marginalized families); it allows greater access to supports such as counselling, psychology, speech, inclusion; and it legitimizes the educational value of early learning and play-based pedagogy. The fact that it is free and available makes it more universal and inclusive than regulated child care.

My child is not ready to be sent to a school or on a bus.

Only you as parents would know this, and it is completely your decision. Many families, for very legitimate reasons, choose not to send their children. That is why kindergarten and junior kindergarten are optional. We do know that when it is available and free, approximately 96% of children participate in kindergarten and more than 90% attend junior kindergarten.