

Children's early learning belongs in neighborhood schools, says researcher

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The beginning of each school year brings an opportunity to reflect, for children, families and also for policymakers. Some important lessons pertain to effective ways provinces and territories [can expand children's](#)

[and families' access](#) to early learning programs.

[Canada-wide early learning and child-care agreements](#) established between the federal government and provinces or territories allow governments to be creative with increasing access. Research can guide that creativity by linking the early years to neighborhood schools.

Programs for 4-year-olds (alternately known as pre-kindergarten, pre-primary, junior kindergarten or two-year kindergarten, depending on the area) belong in neighborhood schools, closely tied into the cascade of schools' curriculum, teaching and learning expertise. These programs establish a continuum of learning and healthy child development.

Right now, access to schooling for 4-year-olds [is not consistent across the country](#), as noted by the Early Childhood Education report by the not-for-profit Atkinson Center.

For example, Alberta, Saskatchewan and New Brunswick have part-time programs for some high-risk children only, while Ontario and Northwest Territories offer universal full-day junior kindergarten in neighborhood schools.

Ample evidence points towards benefits and practical ways of offering high-quality early learning programs in schools quickly and efficiently.

Relying on school infrastructure

Schools can launch early learning and care fast and well by including 4-year-olds in the neighborhood [school](#) in programs offered by the school, free of charge. These programs [recognize that any fee, even \\$10 a day, is a challenge](#) for many, especially those who most need the program.

This approach is efficient and effective, child-friendly and family focused, and informed by a wealth of international research.

Creating more early years spaces

Ample examples exist of governments who have effectively launched school based early learning programs:

- In 2021, 5,900 Nova Scotia children enrolled in pre-primary, after the province first [launched the program in 2017](#). [The Northwest Territories](#) created just over 500 spaces in a similar time frame.
- In 2021–22, with its large and dispersed population, [Ontario enrolled over 250,000 children within five years](#) in what has become a [popular and successful two-year kindergarten program that begins at age 4](#).
- [The Québec government](#) is gradually expanding [their program for 4-year-olds](#) into a universal program operated [by public schools](#).

Canadian success with school-based pre-kindergarten reflects international experiences, including in the United States:

- [In Boston, where a pre-kindergarten program](#) was established in the 1990's, researchers are documenting the lifelong boost [enjoyed by children and economies](#).
- Many [school districts](#) in [California plan to be ahead of schedule](#) in [adding a new grade](#) to their school system to accommodate 4-year-olds.

High-quality programs

For many governments, relying on infrastructure and resources of neighborhood schools has been an effective way to expand access to quality early childhood [education](#). Similar lessons were learned in many schools' move to full-day kindergarten [for 5-year-olds, once unheard of but now enjoyed by all but three provinces in Canada](#).

As regions across Canada work to meet the expansion requirements outlined in the federal agreements, enrollment numbers for existing school-based programs for 4-year-olds offer an attractive route toward creating more early years spaces.

It is not just the rate of expansion that is impressive; so too is the quality of programs. Well-trained educators are attracted to working in neighborhood schools with better pay packages and staff support. Pre-kindergarten and kindergarten share curriculum and teaching approaches that make play the heart of education while cultivating children's enjoyment of learning.

Schools, with curriculum leaders, professional development plans and accountability structures, are better able to monitor and promote quality than the current mix of child-care providers.

Short- and long-term benefits

[National](#) and [international](#) research confirms that including 4-year-olds in early childhood education boosts literacy, numeracy and language learning and behavioral regulation while ensuring [higher graduation rates, post-secondary enrolments, family incomes and reduced draws on social programs](#).

High-quality [early childhood education lowers special education rates](#) and lessens the intensity of supports required for children with identified exceptionalities.

When children are in school-based programs, they enjoy the resources of the school such as gymnasiums and libraries. They have access to support staff such as speech therapists, counselors and psychologists. Families enjoy having all their children at one site, and can sometimes also rely on bussing.

School-based education for four-year olds is particularly appropriate in rural areas where declining populations preclude any viable model of early years programs while schools struggle to maintain enrollment and stay open.

[An economic evaluation of Ontario's model](#) yielded glowing reports on the wisdom of the investment.

Return on investment, continuity of learning

A report from the Roosevelt Institute, a not-for-profit think tank in the United States, notes "[studies of early care and education programs beginning at birth targeted to disadvantaged groups](#)—such as children in low-income communities of color—have demonstrated significant improvements in their long-term education, health, and employment outcomes, leading economist James Heckman to estimate a 13% per year return on investment for similar programs." New York's pre-kindergarten program created 70,000 spaces in two years.

[In Australia, efforts to align programs serving 3- and 4-year-olds](#) with primary grades stress the significance of learning and teaching that smooths the transition for children and families and optimizes academic and developmental outcomes.

Early learning is early education

Strategic planning creates efficiencies through programs informed by research and which assure quality. Families do not want more poor programs for their children. They need to know that their children are immersed in high-quality early learning and they do not want to be exhausted in their search for it.

Early learning [is early education](#). It belongs under the purview of Ministries of Education. The [federal government](#) invested in children's early learning and child-care because it finally accepted the wisdom of doing so—for children's learning and development, for families' well-being, for the economy and for communities optimal social outcomes.

The lessons that we need to learn in our move towards pre-kindergarten tell us much about where [early learning](#) and child care needs to be secured. Governments struggling to increase capacity to meet the demand for child care space would be wise to learn these lessons.

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