



What We Heard: **Consultation on Child Care Needs 2017**

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Purpose

The early years are the most important in a child's development. Research suggests that quality early childhood education programs and services help children succeed in school and help them live healthier, happier lives.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the department) is aware that cost, accessibility, and availability of child care are important issues for families with children under the age of 12. The department also recognizes the important role licensed child care plays in supporting families in our communities.

In 2017, the Government of Nova Scotia opened the Pre-primary Program in 45 schools across the province, with plans to provide access to the program in all communities by 2020-21. This universal, free program is open to children who are at least four years old by December 31 and live in the area where the program is offered.

With the implementation of the Pre-primary Program, government wanted to better understand the needs of families and communities, how the child care sector may be affected by the Pre-primary Program, and how all partners can work together to meet the needs of families and the sector moving forward.

Approach

In the Fall 2017, a Child Care Needs Consultation was conducted by Thinkwell Research. The consultation engaged families with children under 12 years of age and licensed child care operators across the province.

Families were provided with the opportunity to participate in an online survey. A total of 2,341 parents completed the online survey between October 31 and November 21, 2017. A randomized telephone survey was also conducted. A total of 649 parents were surveyed by telephone between December 4 and December 30, 2017. This data set was weighted by county population to ensure the sample was representative of the province as a whole.

Invitations were sent to all licensed child care operators to participate in an online survey. Sixty-four per cent (a total of 254 of licensed child care operators) completed the online survey between November 1 and November 23, 2017.

In addition, focus groups with licensed child care operators were conducted in six locations (Stellarton, Kentville, Sydney, Bridgewater, Halifax, and Truro) in December 2017. A total of 27 representatives from licensed child care centres participated.

Understanding the Needs of Families and Communities

Options for care

Parents who responded to the survey are mostly aware of the options of licensed and unlicensed child care in Nova Scotia, with 84 per cent overall reporting use of licensed child care on the online survey. Parents in the Halifax region are more likely to use licensed child care (88 per cent), compared with the Chignecto-Central (19 per cent use unlicensed care), Strait and Cape Breton-Victoria regions (35–40 per cent use family members).

Overall, parents who responded indicate their children under the age of 5 and not in school receive child care from someone other than themselves or spouse/partner (85 per cent online; 63 per cent telephone). Child care requirements differ depending on the age of the children and parents' employment status. For instance, parents with children 18 months and under report their child is cared for by themselves or spouse/partner (74 per cent online). However, those with children over 18 months but not yet in school report their child is receiving care by someone other than a parent (90 per cent online). Pre-school aged children were mostly receiving child care from licensed child care centres or approved family home child care programs (84 per cent online; 67 per cent telephone). Approximately 50 per cent of parents with school age children who responded online are using before and after school programs (25 per cent telephone survey).

In terms of employment status, parents who are employed are significantly more likely to report their children are receiving care by someone other than themselves or spouse/partner than those not employed (90 per cent versus 66 per cent online; 73 per cent versus 23 per cent telephone).

Where families live geographically may influence the types of child care they require as well as the choices they have. For instance, telephone respondents living in the Halifax region report their pre-school age children receive care from other than a parent/spouse/partner (74 per cent) compared with parents in the Cape Breton-Victoria area (41 per cent). Of the parents who responded online, those with school age children in the Halifax region more likely access a before and after school program (60 per cent) compared to parents with children of the same age in the Chignecto-Central and Strait regions (35 and 32 per cent).

Availability

Parents who require child care but cannot find it, were a minority of the total survey respondents, both online and by telephone. The largest group of parents who required care but were not able to find care are those with children under the age of 18 months (17 per cent), followed by parents with children in school requiring before and after school care (12 per cent). Of those who indicated an immediate need for care, 43 per cent are on a centre wait list. This percentage was higher for those living in the Halifax region.

When choosing child care for their preschool and younger children, parents indicated that the quality of care was most important. For parents with school-age children (five years and up), the importance of both cost and hours of operation rises, but program quality remains the top consideration.

Licensed child care respondents draw their families mainly from the immediate community, and believe they understand their community's child care needs (85 per cent). They report using many different sources to determine those child care needs, including word of mouth, conversations with parents, general participation in the community, and the length of their waiting list. Some use professional networks that communicate frequently with other child care centres, school boards, the department, and community-based groups.

The majority (72 per cent) of licensed child care operators who responded indicated their centres have a wait list. Almost one half (48 per cent) of respondents have wait lists for toddlers, and slightly more than one third reported a wait list for preschoolers, one quarter for infants (27 per cent) and school age (25 per cent).

Respondents believe they could accommodate more children and families if they had

- funding to increase or improve their physical space;
- an increase in their licensed capacity so they could take more children;
- more trained staff (early childhood educators); and
- changes to the ratios (how many children under three they can take; how many children they can have per staff member).

Affordability

Parents who responded to the survey told us they are paying, on average, a little over \$10,000 a year for full time child care. Those using before and after school care reported paying close to \$300/month per child.

The Child Care Subsidy Program provides eligible families with children 12 years of age and under with a subsidy that pays a portion of child care fees in licensed child care centres and approved family home day cares. Most parents who responded to the survey were aware of the subsidy, although few currently receive it.

Responses from licensed child care operators suggest that parents often assume they are ineligible for the Child Subsidy Program due to their income level and may not be aware that a partial subsidy is available for those in the higher income range. They further suggested there may also be a stigma attached to receiving the subsidy. They also believe that families need more information about the subsidy program, requirements for eligibility, and the application process.

Pre-primary Program

Parents who responded online with children of eligible age for the Pre-primary Program represent less than one third of total online respondents (29 per cent). Of that total, the majority (59 per cent) did not enroll their child in Pre-primary because the program is not available yet in their area. Other reasons for not enrolling included hours of operation and transportation issues. Of those who had enrolled their child in the program, 18 per cent had been receiving a child care subsidy prior to the child's enrolment.

Parents who responded online told us their clear preference for the location of the Pre-primary Program, if a school was not an option, was a licensed child care centre.

Understanding Impact of Pre-primary on Licensed Child Care

Awareness

Awareness of the Pre-primary Program by licensed child care respondents is high with 72 per cent knowing details about it. While a high level of concern was expressed about the impact the program will have on licensed child care, most respondents are unsure how they will mitigate these concerns (61 per cent).

Anticipating impact and mitigating risks

Consideration of enrolment patterns for four-year-old children provides some understanding for potential impacts. Licensed child care respondents reported that enrolment for four-year-old children has been consistent within the three years prior to the introduction of the Pre-primary Program. Average enrolments of four-year-olds in licensed preschool classrooms over the past three years were 15 in 2014, 16 in 2015, and 16 in 2016. As of September 2017, enrolment levels declined, to an average of 14. The number of five-year-olds leaving for school each year remains consistent at 11 and 12 for each of the past two years.

Based on what they knew of the Pre-primary Program to date and the potential for a decrease in four-year-old enrolments, 72 per cent of respondents considered these factors would contribute to there being a major impact on their centres, specifically in decreased enrolment (93 per cent), reduced revenue (86 per cent) and increased costs (46 per cent). At the time of the survey, few concerned respondents had developed a plan to address impacts (17 per cent). Such plans included expanding their services to include younger age groups; expanding their before and after school program; providing more evening and weekend care or non-child related programming; and reducing costs. Child care operators indicated they do face challenges in providing before-and after-school care for pre-primary children due to the availability of space.

Respondents voiced concerns that they will need to increase their fees to families to offset the revenues they will lose from exiting preschoolers. However, even with a fee increase, some operators feel that it will be still be difficult to remain viable and indicated they may need to close their pre-school program or their licensed child care centre altogether.

Staffing

Over half of respondents anticipate losing staff because of the Pre-primary Program, which is perceived to be offering higher wages and benefits. Respondents say it is already a challenge to get trained, qualified staff and they don't want to have to compete with the program.

Licensed child care respondents told us they need funding so they can offer competitive wages and benefits to attract qualified staff. They would also like to see government work with industry and educators to provide training and encouragement so more people can pursue careers in early childhood education. They want government to provide recruitment resources.

Partnerships

More than two-thirds (68 per cent) of licensed child care respondents said they would be interested in partnering to provide the Pre-primary Program in their centres. Of those interested, more than 50 per cent indicated a willingness to sign a single, school year agreement to partner with government to deliver the Pre-primary Program. Many said they were "ready to go" or only needed some financial support for renovations or wages to accommodate the program. More trained staff, program supplies, and information on how the partnership would work are also needed. Most respondents who indicated an interest in a partnership say the model should look like what they currently provide for preschool age children; others would follow the department's direction, would house the program in a separate room and/or provide wrap around care for the children.

Other Regulatory Issues

Licensed child care operators identified other regulatory issues.

Before and after school programming

Licensed child care operators report challenges in providing before and after school programming for school age children (age 5–12) and as well as for Pre-primary Program children.

More than one-half (53 per cent) of respondents said they do not have space available to accommodate pre-primary children in their before and after school programming. Renovations are required, as well as potential new facilities, new outdoor space, larger kitchens, etc. They also cite a shortage of qualified early childhood educators (ECEs).

In terms of school-age programs, 57 per cent of respondents said they do not have space currently available. They also listed a lack of funding and staff requirements as their top challenges.

Increased cap

Some respondents suggested government could relax the cap on parent fee increases so they can generate more revenue, as a result of the Pre-primary Program.

Ratios

There was no clear consensus from licensed child care respondents on how or if ratios for staff-to-children should be amended. One-third of respondents felt that ratios should be amended, while 41 per cent felt ratios should not be amended. Of those who favoured amended ratios, the suggested ratios for full day programs, when averaged, were in line with the current ratios (1:4 infants; 1:8 preschoolers).

Suggested changes for part day programs are significantly lower in comparison with current ratios for toddlers (1:6 compared with 1:12) and preschoolers (1:9 compared with 1:12). For school-age programs, those in favour of amended ratios suggest a reduction from 1:15 to 1:13.

Most respondents agree with the current definitions of each age group (infant, toddler, preschooler, and school-age child). Almost half, however, (47 per cent) believe that school-age groups could be split into two groupings, 4–7 year olds and 8–12 year olds because each grouping requires different types of programming. There is also support for having more flexibility in moving a child from one category to the next based on their centre's assessment.

Other programs

Over 50 per cent of licensed child care respondents believe government should provide oversight for recreational programs offered by community providers. They feel these should follow the same rules and best practices used by licensed child care operators. This encompasses a wide variety of topics, including health and safety, background checks, staff qualifications, facilities/infrastructure and child ratios/group size.

Moving Forward

The results from this consultation will help the department move forward to build a strong early childhood education system in Nova Scotia. The results validate what families and licensed child care operators have been telling us. Families need responsive child care, that is high quality and affordable. Licensed child care operators need information on the Pre-primary Program so they can make long-term plans. They want to work with the department to partner to deliver the Pre-primary Program where space is an issue in schools, and to adjust their delivery models to respond to the needs of families and communities.

The department will continue on-going conversations with families and licensed child care operators in Nova Scotia in the coming months and years ahead on ways to further collaborate and work together to meet our collective objectives.

