

**A Provincial Early
Childhood Learning
Strategy**

What We Heard



**Early Childhood Division,
Department of Education
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Introduction

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador has made a commitment to develop a provincial strategic plan for early childhood learning. The Department of Education is the identified lead for this strategy on behalf of partner departments which are members of the ministerial council. These include the Department of Health and Community Services; the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services; the Department of Human Resources, Labour and Employment; and the Department of Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs. Each of these departments has key responsibilities for policies, programs and services that support early childhood learning for children from birth to age six years and their families.

The focus of this strategy is to coordinate an inter-departmental approach that will support best practices in early childhood learning for children birth to age six years.

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Background

The Provincial Government is specifically interested in what it can do to enhance early childhood learning opportunities, support parental involvement, and create a smooth transition to school for all children. A well-planned early childhood learning environment that is supportive of the individual needs of all children and incorporates inclusive practices is critical.

The Minister of Education is responsible for all aspects of the K-12 and post-secondary education systems in the province. In 2005, this role was broadened to include learning in the early years before the age of five. In January 2005, the Division of Early Childhood Learning was created to focus on the learning needs of pre-Kindergarten children. Its mandate is to provide strategic direction to initiatives in the area of early childhood learning. It also provides support to the Ministerial Council on Early Childhood Learning which is chaired by the Minister of Education, and includes Ministers of Health and Community Services; Child Youth and Family Services; Human Resources, Labour and Employment, and Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs.

The ministerial council, through the work of the Early Childhood Learning Division, will foster the coordination and development of comprehensive programs and services across all government departments and agencies that focus on the early childhood learning needs of children and their families.

The importance of early childhood learning experiences in shaping children's development throughout their lives is well documented. Current research has provided a better understanding of how children learn in the early years and the importance of quality early learning opportunities.

This strategy will be based on current research and best practices and will focus on the following statements:

- Children learn best in play-based environments.
- Supporting parents and families during the early years is critical.
- Building on the interests, strengths, and needs of communities to support early childhood learning is necessary.

Consultation Process

Officials from the Department of Education held a series of public consultation sessions throughout the province from September 7 - November 26, 2010. The purpose of the consultation sessions was to seek input from stakeholders and the general public on the draft vision, mission and principle statements, and three proposed components that form the basis of a proposed provincial early childhood learning strategy.

Consultation sessions took place in the form of public meetings throughout the province, focus groups with selected stakeholders and written submissions by mail or email. An early childhood learning web link, www.gov.nl.ca/edu, provided electronic access to the discussion guide and consultation questions from September 7 to October 31, 2010. A toll free telephone line was also available for feedback purposes. The following table provides a summary of consultation participation:

Summary of Consultation Participation

Consultations	Number of Sessions	Number of Participants
District Meetings ¹	7	111
Focus Groups	33	306
Public Sessions	17	135
Totals	57	552
Written Submissions ²	33	

Each consultation session began with a short presentation and overview of: key research; proposed framework components and rationale; and vision, mission and principle statements. Following this short presentation, select questions were posed for feedback specific to the draft mission, vision and principle statements and proposed strategy components. There was ample opportunity for question and answers, and general feedback. Reference was made to the on-line discussion guide and consultation questions for those wishing to review again at their leisure and/or provide written feedback.

¹ Meetings were held in June 2010 with school district personnel to inform them of the proposed early childhood learning strategy.

² Five were general e-mail submissions related to the proposed early childhood learning strategy and 28 were written submissions in response to the consultation questions.

Consultation Highlights

The following section summarizes the views, ideas and opinions of consultation participants concerning the proposed early childhood learning strategy. This feedback is a culmination of what was heard through public meetings, focus groups and written submissions. This input will be instrumental in helping inform the development and implementation of the proposed strategy.

This section is organized according to categories of questions that were included in the *Discussion Guide*; the order of presentation does not reflect the frequency of comments or priority.

Draft Vision Statement

Children from birth to age six and their families will have access to a range of supports, services, and early childhood programs that will enhance early childhood learning.

Questions:

In your opinion, is the vision statement:

- Comprehensive enough? Why or why not?
- Specific enough? Why or why not?
- Achievable in your community? Why or why not?
- Do you have any other suggestions or comments? Please explain

Feedback:

Consultation participants supported and agreed with the draft vision statement. Generally speaking, the statement was found to be specific and comprehensive enough. In addition, the following important points were emphasized:

- Consideration needs to be given to the literacy level of wording in the statement to ensure that all people understand its meanings (i.e., plain language).
- Accessibility to programs and services for all children and their families may be compromised, especially in rural communities where transportation can be an issue.
- Consideration needs to be given to the cost of programs and services offered to children and their families; free programming is optimal.

Draft Mission Statement

The Provincial Government will provide for a seamless, integrated continuum of early childhood learning opportunities for young children from birth to age six and their families.

Questions:

In your opinion, is the draft mission statement:

- Comprehensive enough? Why or why not?
- Specific enough? Why or why not?
- Achievable in your community? Why or why not?
- Do you have any other suggestions or comments? Please explain.

Feedback:

Consultation participants supported and agreed with the draft mission statement. Generally speaking, the statement was found to be specific and comprehensive enough. In addition, the following important points were emphasized:

- Consideration needs to be given to the literacy level of wording in the statement to ensure that all people understand its meanings (i.e., plain language).
- Sustainability of the programs and services is important; this requires the support from government.

Draft Principle Statements

- *Families and society have a responsibility to foster optimal learning of young children.*
- *Investment in the early years is an investment in our province which will yield significant positive social and economic outcomes.*
- *Comprehensive programs and services are inclusive, culturally diverse, and respectful of community and family circumstances.*
- *Partnership and collaboration among government departments and the early child development community contribute to effective programs and services.*
- *Accountability and measuring success are an integral part of monitoring, assessing, and communicating analysis to the public.*

Questions:

When considering the draft guiding principle statements:

- Do you feel they are comprehensive enough? Why or why not.
- Are there any key principles that are missing from these statements? Please explain.

- Do you feel that any of these statements need further clarification?
Please explain.
- Do you have any other suggestions or comments?
Please explain.

Feedback:

Consultation participants supported and agreed with the draft principle statements. Generally speaking, the statements were found to be comprehensive and inclusive of all key principles. In addition, the following important points were emphasized:

- Consideration needs to be given to the literacy level of wording in the statements to ensure that all people understand their meanings (i.e., plain language).
- Programs and services should be *inclusive* and *culturally diverse as stated*; need to ensure that this becomes reality and not empty promises.
- Concern that accessibility to programs and services may be compromised by waitlists -- needs to be addressed.
- Partnerships should include families since children's optimal learning opportunities happen with their families.
- Need to be clear on what is being measured - the success of the children or the success of the programs/services?
- Some question whether government funding will support only government programs and services. Community programs and services should also benefit.
- Suggestion that early childhood learning be clearly defined so that people do not equate learning with only academics.
- Educating parents on appropriate learning practices for their children is crucial.

Proposed Strategy Components

Component #1

Enhanced support for parents focusing on early childhood learning opportunities for children birth to age three years

Questions:

- As a **parent/guardian** what type(s) of information and/or programs and resources on early childhood learning do you find helpful to you? Please explain.
- OR**
- As a **professional** who works with young children and families, what type(s) of information and/or programs and resources on early childhood learning do you find helpful to you? Please explain.
- Are there key times between children's birth to age three years when you would like to have this information available to support early childhood learning? Please explain.
- What would be the best way(s) for you to get information and/or programs and resources on early childhood learning? Please explain.

Feedback:

- Provide universal support to parents of children birth to age three years
- Important for Public Health to recognize the prenatal period as essential in supporting parents and, subsequently, the early learning needs of children.
- Enhance support for parents by streamlining and coordinating programs and services that already exist, and increasing participant engagement.
- Consider how to engage families who have barriers to participation.
- Provide better family support and parental leave.
- Encourage family friendly work policies and practices.
- Develop and implement an awareness campaign with key messages:
 - The importance of the early years
 - The important role that parents play in children's early learning
- Provide information to families concerning:
 - Developmental milestones
 - Importance of play in early learning
- Provide information via many avenues.
- Deliver information, resources and early learning opportunities through many/existing professionals.
- Highlight need for consistent messaging across professionals.
- Use flexible models and modes of delivery which consider the changing family structure and community circumstances.
- Develop sustainable partnerships at the community level.
- Consider the unique needs of families and communities in developing and implementing early learning opportunities.
- Address timely access to child therapeutic development programs and services
- Support children's learning and overall development.

Component #2

Provision of enhanced early learning opportunities for four year olds (e.g., story time programs offered through public libraries, early literacy programming, regulated child care, enhanced KinderStart or other school-based activities)

Questions:

- What could government do to enhance early childhood learning opportunities for all four year old children? Please explain.
- Are there any opportunities to enhance existing early childhood learning programs, services and/or supports for all four year old children? Please explain.
- Are there any challenges and/or barriers to implementing early childhood learning opportunities for all four year old children? Please explain.
- How might the Provincial Government enhance the transition to school for all children?

Feedback:

- Recognize there is limited programs for four years olds.
- Consider recruitment and retention of early childhood educators.
- Enhance programming for four year olds (e.g., through public libraries, child care services and family resource programs).
- Ensure programming for four years olds is developmentally appropriate.
- Consider regulated child care as integral to enhanced early learning opportunity.
- Consider a degree program that would build capacity and leadership in the early childhood sector.
- Consider a junior Kindergarten model.
- Enhance KinderStart (e.g., more frequent sessions and sessions of longer duration).
- Address transportation challenges.
- Develop sustainable partnerships at the community level.

Component #3**Possibility of full-day Kindergarten****Questions:**

- Should there be full-day Kindergarten?
- What factors need to be considered for each of the following options for full-day kindergarten? Consider both the benefits and the challenges.
 - Implementation of full-day Kindergarten in all districts and all schools concurrently. Please explain.
 - A phased-in implementation of full-day Kindergarten as districts and schools are able to accommodate it. Please explain.

Feedback:

- While there was general support for implementation of full-day Kindergarten throughout the province, participants from some geographic areas raised concerns about readiness for full-day Kindergarten for those children who have not attended any preschool programming (i.e., child care services, family resource programs).
 - Suggested solution was to phase-in the length of full-day Kindergarten (i.e., begin with half-day in September and phase-in full-day beginning in October)
- Promote developmentally appropriate practice (e.g., play-based).
- Prepare the system:
 - Infrastructure
 - Professional learning at different levels (district staff, administrators, teachers, student support personnel)
 - Play-based materials
 - Assessment approach
- Review space, professional development, staff allocation, support staff, class size, multi-age classroom teaching.
- Consider transition for children who have not been previously engaged in other social groups.
- Consider long school days and bus rides for young children (rural).

- Consider phase-in process of full-day Kindergarten (i.e., demonstration sites).
- Consider possible role for early childhood educators in classrooms.
- Review/revise the *Schools Act, 1999*.
- Consider impact of full-day Kindergarten on intensive applied behavioural analysis (ABA) for Kindergarten children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Other Feedback:

Concerns were raised regarding:

- Eligibility for intensive ABA for Kindergarten children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.
- Extensive waitlists for existing programs and services such as occupational therapy, speech language pathology and early intervention services.
- Quality and lack of child care (especially of concern in select areas).
- Parents' choice of early learning activities/opportunities that their children engage in (some parents would like to have that choice).

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Consultation Participants

This consultation has drawn upon the ideas, opinions, and expertise of many people including but not limited to:

- Aboriginal Women's Network
- Association of New Canadians
- Coalition of Child Care Advocates
- College of the North Atlantic (Early Childhood Education Program)
- Community advocacy groups, e.g., Autism Society of Newfoundland and Labrador, Down Syndrome Society, Learning Disabilities Association
- Department of Child, Youth and Family Services
- Department of Education (i.e., Student Support Services, Research and Evaluation, Curriculum Development)
- Department of Health and Community Services
- Department of Human Resources, Labour and Employment (Disability Policy Office and Poverty Reduction Strategy)
- Department of Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs
- Department of Municipal Affairs
- Disability Policy Office
- Early childhood educators including representatives from the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Newfoundland and Labrador (AECENL)
- Family agencies (e.g., Family and Child Care Connections (FCCC) and Family Outreach Centre)
- Family child care providers (regulated)
- Family resource program representatives
- Francophone Association
- Innu Nation
- Labrador Metis Nation
- Library personnel
- Licensees and owners and operators of private child care centres including Provincial Association of Childcare Administrators Licentiate (PACAL) and others
- Members of House of Assembly/Assistants
- Memorial University of Newfoundland (Faculty of Education, research interest in early childhood literacy development)
- Miawpukek First Nation
- Mushuau Innu First Nation
- Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour
- Newfoundland and Labrador Library Association
- Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association (NLTA)
- Nunatsiavut Government
- Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism
- Parents of young children and their families

- Private Colleges
- Provincial Advisory Council for the Status of Women
- Provincial Association of Family Resource Programs
- Regional health authorities (e.g., public health/community health nurses; parent child health coordinators; child management specialists; child care services consultants; social workers; managers/directors responsible for public health programs and services, family resource programs/child care services/early intervention)
- Rural Secretariat
- School district representatives, boards, councils and administrators
- School teachers (Kindergarten and grade one teachers particularly)
- Sheshatshui Innu First Nation
- Single Parents Association
- The Women's Centre
- Voluntary and Non-Profit Secretariat
- Women's Policy Office

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Summary

What We Heard reports on the consultation on early childhood learning in Newfoundland and Labrador. It summarizes the opinions and feedback provided by key stakeholders and the public who participated in the consultation process. This document acknowledges and thanks the many stakeholders, organizations and individuals that provided this input as it will be instrumental in helping inform the development and implementation of the proposed early childhood learning strategy.

Some feedback was of a regional perspective, identifying unique concerns to specific regions of the province. However, more often feedback confirmed that most concerns are common to many areas of the province. Comments and advice about the types of early childhood learning programs/services that will be required, how best to deliver these programs/services, and where these programs/services are most needed characterized the bulk of all consultation discussions. Ultimately, consultation participants agreed that there is a fundamental need to better address the early learning needs of our province's children.

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador is moving forward with its goal to help enhance early childhood learning opportunities, support parental involvement, and create a smooth transition to school for all children of this province and their families. Government looks forward to continued work with various stakeholders, organizations and individuals in a spirit of collaboration to develop the proposed early childhood learning strategy that will help shape the future for the children of this province.