

Families need schools to step up
By Kerry McCuaig

Across Canada it is a familiar scene, parents lined up in the cold to get their kids into a preferred slot at a preschool. Whether motivated by a desire to give their child a head start for school or the need for care so they can work, the challenge is the same - too many children for too few good spots.

But in the Northwest Territories the scene is changing. Publicly funded schools are filling the breach. If 4-year-olds are getting ready for kindergarten, it is because early education has proven itself a cost-effective intervention. As the name suggests kindergarten is not a junior academy but a place where children learn how to learn, where they hone their social and emotional skills with their peers in a playful environment.

Schools are a logical place to support children's early development. They exist in every community and come with heat, light, qualified educators and special needs supports. For far less costs than building an early education facility from scratch, schools can reach all families – high and low income, those in small communities and the urban centres.

Tots in schools are a growing trend. President Obama has made universal pre-Kindergarten for 4-year-olds his key plank in closing the educational gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. All Ontario 4-year-olds are in full time kindergarten this year. In the province's French language schools youngsters enroll at age 3. Even Quebec, with its much-envied \$7-a-day child care, is expanding kindergarten to include 4-year-olds. Despite huge investments, child care still reaches only 69 per cent of preschoolers. Least likely to attend Quebec daycare are the children who could use it most; those from low income families, new Canadians or youngsters with special needs.

The advantages of junior kindergarten extend beyond children. Parents who are part of a strong public preschool program may find support there to address their own health needs or to return to work or school. When public education starts earlier, the expensive burden of day care is lifted sooner. Benefits to parents circle back to their children, who gain not only from their own learning but from having parents who are less stressed by the economic efforts of parenting.

Junior kindergarten has its critics. Child care operators worry about losing business, school boards question the costs, experts worry that 4 is too early to be in school all day.

Where 4-year-old kindergarten operates these concerns fade. Parents who originally worried become champions when they see how their children excel. School boards seeing plummeting vulnerability levels in their students consider it money well directed. Operators are able to open up spaces for the infant to 3-year-old age group.

Business has also taken an interest in early education, arguing that the economy requires an educated work force and that starting sooner avoids costs down the road. The TD Bank's chief economist has taken to platforms across Canada saying that the benefits are not just long-term, but immediate — that early education creates jobs, leaves parents free to work and reduces the number of children in high-priced special education programs.

Cost-benefits aside, schools belong to the people of the NWT. Kindergarten for 4-year-olds provides schools an opportunity to shine as places where children are wrapped in affection and respect and where their hopes take hold and soar.

This article first appeared in the Yellowknifer, February 27, 2014. Kerry McCuaig is the Atkinson Fellow in Early Childhood Policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies for Education, University of Toronto.