

The Rationale for Expanding Public Education to Include Preschool-Aged Children

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We all want our children to have the best chance at a good life. Fifty years of research shows participation in a high-quality preschool program benefits children’s development and reduces gaps at school entry. Early education’s advantages carry forward, showing a powerful effect on children’s later learning, behavior and health outcomes. When the majority of children regularly participate in quality early education, outcomes for the overall population improve.



Across Canada only 1-in-2 children over the age of two participate in some form of preschool. Wide-scale access to early childhood education (ECE) will require an enabling environment that includes; legislation, regulations and standards, curriculum, professional development and assessment. Public education’s framework has adequate capacity to support such an enabling environment; with a ready-made delivery and accountability infrastructure that could include younger children and support coherent expansion.

Unlike schools, Canada’s current patchwork of child care and preschool programs is primarily delivered as a market service. Access varies, as does quality. Evidence in Canada and elsewhere indicates that mixed delivery of preschool creates access, quality and accountability challenges. Relying on a mix of delivery agents – public, private, non-profit – necessitates negotiating multiple relationships and systems.

Public education offers a sturdy platform that avoids, or at least reduces, these challenges. Building public education down to provide universal preschool is an alternative to market delivery.

Note on terminology: Early childhood education refers to group programs for children prior to school entry, using a developmental approach to children’s learning guided by qualified educators. Depending on the jurisdiction, programs have different names including: kindergarten, junior kindergarten, Pre-k, preschool, nursery school, child care, day care, école maternelle, Head Start, primary, pre-primary, etc.

1. Increased participation, particularly for disadvantaged children

Preschool programs can only improve children's outcomes if access is widespread and equitable (LaRue & Kelly, 2015; Weisenfeld, Frede & Barnett, 2018). Despite Quebec's extensive, low cost child care program, disadvantaged children are less likely to attend (Fortin, 2018). In other jurisdictions where limited subsidies are available to offset child care costs, participation by low-income families remains low. A scarcity of subsidies, restrictive eligibility and an application process that is described by parents as demeaning, creates too many barriers.

In the United States almost two decades of focused advocacy has resulted in increased public funding for Pre-K and other programs for preschool-aged children with special needs. Still, only 44 % of 4-year-olds and 16 % of 3-year-olds attend (Weisenfeld, Frede & Barnett, 2018). Evaluations conclude that the mixed delivery of Pre-K is complicated to fund and program access and quality are inconsistent. Recommendations include moving to a public-school funding formula to provide adequate resources, promote equitable access and improve program quality and workforce compensation (Weisenfeld et al., 2018).

When preschool programs are broadly offered, vulnerable children are more likely to participate (Akbari & McCuaig, 2018; CHANCES, in press; McCuaig, 2010). Entitlement programs, like school, don't carry a stigma. Participation by vulnerable children is comparable to children from more advantaged families. For example, Ontario's Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) program is available to all 4- and 5-year-olds, and fully integrated into elementary schools. 90% of 4-year-olds and 95% of 5-year-olds participate. Preschool for 3-year-olds is offered by profit and non-profit agencies where enrolment drops to under 25%.

2. Improved quality

Preschool education requires consistent pedagogical practices, ongoing assessment and coherent professional learning that builds on foundational knowledge about how children learn.

Arguments that funding differentials are responsible for variations in quality and access between public and private providers do not hold up under scrutiny. Boston Public Schools have invested in 4-year-old preschool since 2006 using public schools and community-based child care and preschool centres that are connected to schools. Requirements include a common curriculum that bridges into primary grades. Educators in all settings have the same qualifications and receive comparable compensation and professional development supports (Weiland, 2017). Despite equitable resources and standards, evaluations found inconsistencies in access and quality across programs (Boston Public School, 2018). In contrast, FDK is an entitlement for every 4-year old. Scaled up over 5 years, FDK is in every elementary school, accommodates approximately 125,000 children and is showing positive outcomes for children in vocabulary, number knowledge and self-regulation at Grade 2 and in reading and math at Grade 3 (Pelletier, 2018).

3. Improved transitions

The integration of preschool programs into public education enhances a continuum of learning that maximizes the benefits of early education. International studies point to benefits when children experience consistent pedagogical and curriculum approaches (LaRue & Kelly, 2015; OECD, 2017; Moser et al., 2017). As part of public education, early-years learning joins the continuum of learning that extends into secondary education, eliminating the need for strategies to help children and families transition from early education to grade school.

Early childhood education's pedagogy of play-based learning is a powerful tool for promoting critical and creative thinking, curiosity, communication skills as well as literacy and numeracy abilities throughout the school years. Because learning is cumulative, an education system is most effective when each level flows seamlessly into the next (LaRue & Kelly, 2015; OECD, 2017). Rather than "schoolification" – the pushing down of isolated academic skills to younger children – the addition of programs for younger children promotes "playification" – experiential and self-directed learning – in later grades.

When early learning is provided via mixed delivery, it limits opportunities for educators to align practices, for parents and children to become familiar with schools, and for schools to refresh their pedagogical approaches as they adapt to younger learners. Children face a greater challenge transitioning into elementary grades and this can dilute the positive benefits of early education.

4. Increased accountability

The experience of Pre-K in the United States demonstrates the complexity of maintaining oversight in a mixed delivery system. One of the identified 15 essential elements for effective preschool is an integrated system. "Law, regulation, and (or) the state's activities align standards, curriculum, professional development, and assessment. The state has adequate capacity to support this through the office administering the program and interagency groups" (Weisenfeld, 2018 p 10). To date only 10% of U.S. Pre-K programs are assessed as meeting this element.

In 1990, Spain began offering full day programs to 3-year-olds in addition to expanding their 4-year-olds programs to a full day in public schools. A recent cost-benefit analysis (Huizen, Dumhs & Plantenga, 2017) shows positive results. The cost benefit ratio is over 4:1 and mostly due to children's later academic performance and employment outcomes rather than an increase in maternal or parental employment. Although national quality standards for preschool were introduced and supported, the decentralized structure of Spanish public education resulted in variations across the country. The curriculum and pedagogy were unexceptional but nevertheless good enough to have a positive impact on children's learning and development.

Differing curriculum and pedagogy and regulatory requirements create confusion for parents and ultimately make programs more difficult to monitor, to ensure their quality and the appropriate use of public funding. At the same time, because public funding is in place, the government is perceived to have responsibility for oversight. Government is responsible but must share authority, leaving it at greater risk when problems arise.

There are challenges when education offers preschool programs. While welcomed by parents, school-offered preschool has met with opposition from child care operators fearing client loss and service disruption (McCuaig et al., 2014; McCuaig et al., 2015). In British Columbia, Strong Start child and family centres were designed as an extension of public education. In a few communities where space in schools was an issue, non-profit agencies were contracted to operate the program. Moving delivery back to education upset operations and, in some cases, fuelled discord (McCuaig et al., In press). Kindergarten on PEI was historically delivered-through private centres. An extensive effort was required to move it into public schools, which included new investments and an extensive reorganization of child care services (Flanagan, 2010).

MOVING FORWARD

Expanding preschool opportunities through public education makes sense and many jurisdictions have chosen schools as their base for preschool. Despite its expansive child care program, Quebec is expanding 4-year-old kindergarten. Ontario's FDK program enjoys popularity with parents (Stover & Pelletier, 2018). Junior kindergarten is available to all children in the Northwest Territories. In British Columbia, Strong Start family centres are in 50% of elementary schools. Pre-Primary is rolling out in Nova Scotia for 4-year-old children and half of Saskatchewan elementary schools offer pre-kindergarten programs for 3- and 4-year-olds. (Akbari & McCuaig, 2018). All told, about 40% of Canadian 4-year-olds get their preschool education in school.

Canadians hold public education in high regard compared to other Anglo-American countries where enrolment rates in public schools are much lower particularly among children from professional and higher-income families. Support for public education is well founded. The recent UNICEF Canada report (UNICEF Canada, 2018) points to the strong performance of public education in reducing equity gaps. Canada ranks 9th out of 40 countries in assessments of 15-year-olds and is credited with improving outcomes for immigrant children. With a stronger preschool system, Canada's schools could rank in the top three worldwide.

Internationally, the trend towards integrating preschool into public education is gaining momentum. UNICEF, for instance, has committed to elevating the priority and status of early childhood education by systematically integrating preschool into the education planning processes (UNICEF, 2018).

CONCLUSION

If the primary goal of a preschool program is to enhance children's early experiences, and improve later academic achievement and health and well-being, then public policy must achieve two goals: access must be universal and equitable and the learning environment must be stable and of high quality.

The challenge of designing an effective system that benefits all preschool children requires taking high quality early childhood education programs to scale. The two essential goals of access and quality require an effective delivery platform. In Canada, the public education is the logical option.

Delivery through public education offers a ready-made infrastructure that is based on equity, universal access, and coherent and consistent quality standards. Mixed delivery requires considerably more attention and resources yet access and quality remain inconsistent, lowering the social return on this vital investment.

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