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# TEN REASONS TO EXPAND PUBLIC KINDERGARTEN

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Increasingly, jurisdictions are aligning with the evidence and committing to a two-year, play-based preschool program for four- and five-year-old children. Kindergarten is available to all five-year-olds across Canada, and more than half of Canadian four-year-olds participate in some form of school-based programming. Junior kindergarten is universally offered in schools in the Northwest Territories, Ontario, and Nova Scotia, and is expanding in Quebec. Newfoundland and Labrador is also using its community schools to serve four-year-olds and has committed to phasing in universal junior kindergarten.

Delivering two years of kindergarten within the public school system leverages existing investments in education and helps address several challenges facing families, communities, and governments, including:

- Children entering Grade 1 with developmental gaps
- Growing demand for special education, driven by increases in academic and language delays and behavioural challenges
- Rising child care costs that reduce parental labour force participation, particularly among mothers
- Persistently high rates of illiteracy, including challenges in reading, writing, and numeracy, which undermine long-term economic outcomes

Kindergarten delivers its best outcomes when:

- Enough children attend to impact population health outcomes
- Children attend for two or more years prior to compulsory schooling
- Children attend for a minimum of 20 hours per week
- Programs are of high quality

This paper highlights 10 research areas documenting the rationale for universal pre-K.

## 1. KINDERGARTEN IS NO MORE EXPENSIVE THAN LICENSED CHILD CARE

Publicly funded education offers cost advantages for early learning and child care that the private sector cannot match. Craig Alexander, a leading Canadian economist, identifies seven core benefits of expanding public education that “capture the evidence on why provinces introduced kindergarten to schools in the first place and why Canada would benefit from continuing this success by extending pre-kindergarten to younger ages and increasing the hours in early learning” (Alexander, 2024, p. 21). Similarly, Gordon Cleveland, another prominent Canadian economist, reaches the same conclusion in his

review of Ontario’s junior kindergarten (JK) model, describing the program as a major success (Cleveland, 2021).

The cost of fully subsidizing a child care space can exceed the cost of delivering kindergarten. Existing school space can often be repurposed at significantly lower cost than constructing new child care facilities. Supports for junior kindergarten—such as administration, professional development, and oversight—can be integrated within existing school infrastructure, rather than requiring the creation of a parallel regulatory system for the private sector. In smaller communities, four-year-old children can also be integrated into existing classrooms.

This publicly delivered model, applicable from junior kindergarten through Grade 6, has been successfully implemented in Quebec for more than 25 years. No parent fees are charged for the school portion of the day. Parents requiring extended hours pay between \$10 and \$20 per day, depending on income, for before- and after-school care provided by school boards.

Quebec parents value the junior kindergarten program; where it is available, participation rates reach 98 percent. When kindergarten is structured to support children’s development while accommodating parents’ work schedules, public costs are partially offset by increased tax revenues as more parents enter the workforce and reduce their reliance on income-tested social programs.

## 2. A STRONGER START TO GRADE ONE THAT CARRIES FORWARD

Two years of full-day learning prior to Grade 1 lay a strong foundation for future educational success by preparing children for school. Children develop essential skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, while strengthening language abilities. At the same time, key competencies—including problem-solving, creative thinking, social skills, emotional maturity, and behavioural regulation—are cultivated.

In Ontario, research demonstrates improved academic and social outcomes for children attending full-day kindergarten compared with those in half-day programs (Pelletier, 2012; 2017). Although full-day kindergarten became universally available in Ontario only in 2014, the province subsequently updated its elementary curriculum to reflect the more advanced skills and interests of children entering Grade 1.

The expansion of preschool programs in the United States has been accompanied by extensive research. Findings consistently demonstrate positive academic and social-emotional outcomes for children when programs are of high quality—that is, when delivered by qualified educators using intentional, play-based pedagogy (Barnett, 2011; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013).

Similarly, longitudinal research in the United Kingdom indicates significant academic and social-emotional benefits associated with each additional year of preschool attendance prior to school entry, with effects persisting into high school. These outcomes include stronger mathematical skills, independent of children’s family socioeconomic status (SES) (Sylva et al., 2013).

### 3. REACHING VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Early Development Instrument (EDI) results across Canada indicate that 27 percent of children are vulnerable upon entering Grade 1—that is, they experience difficulties in one or more social, emotional, cognitive, physical, or language domains (Jambon et al., 2025). These vulnerabilities may compromise children’s ongoing academic success.

Equally concerning are rising rates of child poverty, which affect nearly one in five Canadian children. In New Brunswick, the child poverty rate exceeds the national average at 22 percent, and among children under the age of six, almost 25 percent live in poverty (Campaign 2000, 2024).

Children with social-emotional and learning vulnerabilities are found across all socioeconomic groups, but they are disproportionately concentrated among children from low-SES families and in low-SES neighbourhoods. At the same time, children from low-income families are underrepresented in early learning and child care programs, where access is largely determined by parental employment status and the ability to pay fees.

A universal, school-based program is better positioned to reach and accommodate all children, particularly those most at risk. Despite significant public investment in expanding child care, the Quebec government is now implementing four-year-old kindergarten within schools to address persistently low participation rates among children from low-income families.

### 4. REDUCING SPECIAL EDUCATION ENROLLMENT

Approximately 15 percent of the school-aged population requires special education supports, and about 60 percent of these students experience delays in literacy and numeracy, language development, and/or behavioural regulation. International research demonstrates that a two-year early learning experience significantly improves outcomes in these domains, particularly for children from low-SES families (Philpott et al., 2019).

In the United States, a review of 22 longitudinal studies found that attending kindergarten for two years was associated with an 8 percent reduction in special education placements and a 10 percent increase in high school graduation rates (McCoy et al., 2017). A review of the European Union literature reported similar results, noting that these gains were sustained throughout children’s school years, particularly when programs were of high quality (Ulferts et al., 2019).

Evidence from the United Kingdom further underscores these effects. One longitudinal study found that 51 percent of children who did not attend kindergarten were cognitively at risk at age six, compared with 21 percent of children who had participated in at least two years of preschool. The reductions were consistent across domains: reading (44 percent versus 23 percent), mathematics (37 percent versus 16 percent), and social development (51 percent versus 21 percent) (Sammons et al., 2003).

Comparable findings have been reported in Ontario. Children who did not participate in two years of full-day kindergarten were three times more likely to score more than one standard deviation below the mean in self-regulation, 1.5 times more likely to lag in language development, and twice as likely to lag in reading achievement (Pelletier & Fesseha, 2019).

Collectively, this body of research highlights the critical role of high-quality early learning in reducing reliance on special education services. A UK study comparing high- and low-quality early education programs found substantial differences in long-term outcomes. Melhuish et al. (2019) reported a 45 percent reduction in

cognitive risk by age five among children attending high-quality preschool, compared with a 36 percent reduction among those attending lower-quality programs. By age 16, the gap widened further, with a 55 percent reduction in cognitive risk for children who experienced high-quality early education, compared with a 40 percent reduction for those who attended lower-quality programs.

IMPACT OF ECE PARTICIPATION AT SECONDARY SCHOOL

	No ECE	With ECE	Results
Special Education	28.3%	20.3%	Special education placement down 8.1%
Grade Retention	30.6%	22.7%	Grade repetition down 8.3%
High School Graduation	62.6%	74.0%	High school graduation rates up 11.4%

Source: McCoy, Yoshikawa, Aliol-Guest et al, 2017; Akbari & McCuaig, in press.

## 5. MORE TIME WITH FRIENDS, MORE TIME TO PLAY

Children require sustained peer interaction to support healthy development. A full school day provides greater time for both formal and informal learning while preserving opportunities for child-directed, play-based experiences. Research shows that children in full-day kindergarten programs report higher levels of enjoyment and engagement at school (Pelletier, 2012; Page & Tayler, 2016).

Children who are English or French language learners, in particular, benefit from regular, meaningful peer interactions, which accelerate second-language acquisition while also supporting the maintenance and development of their home language (Hertzman, 2011).

## 6. A SEAMLESS DAY AND EXPERIENCE

Two-year programs—particularly those offering extended hours aligned with parents’ work schedules—allow children to remain in familiar settings with consistent educators and peers, rather than moving between multiple programs and locations. Extending the school day beyond regular hours, either on-site or in nearby locations, is often feasible. Reducing or eliminating daily transitions supports children’s

well-being and decreases stress, logistical complexity, and associated costs for families (Janmohamed et al., 2014).

## 7. PLAY-BASED LEARNING CURRICULUM

Young children benefit from a play-based learning curriculum that uses play as a vehicle for intentional, developmentally appropriate learning. The Nordic countries—among the world’s highest performers in secondary-school literacy, numeracy, and science—do not introduce formal instruction in reading and mathematics until age seven. Instead, they provide universal, full-day preschool programs that emphasize play-based learning as a foundation for later academic success (McCain, Mustard & McCuaig, 2011).

When play-based learning extends into the early primary years, it creates a coherent curricular and pedagogical continuum that positively influences children’s school readiness and long-term academic outcomes (Loewenberg, 2025). Delivering two years of kindergarten within the public school system enables the establishment of this continuum of learning, supporting both academic achievement and social development as children transition into the primary grades (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

## 8. EDUCATORS ARE CRITICAL TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

Effective pedagogy for young children depends on educators with a strong foundation in early development and learning (LaRue & Kelly, 2015). Educators continuously make instructional and curricular decisions that respond to children’s existing knowledge, skills, interests, and learning dispositions. Within a play-based learning continuum, the educator’s role spans a range of approaches—from child-directed exploration to intentionally guided experiences—based on children’s developmental needs (Pyle & Danniels, 2016).

Qualified early childhood educators are grounded in specialized knowledge of early human development and play-based pedagogy. Research indicates that educators holding general education degrees, including a Bachelor of Education, do not necessarily provide higher-quality learning environments for younger children unless their training includes a specific focus on early childhood development and pedagogy (Pascal, 2009).

To maintain and strengthen high-quality practice, early childhood educators benefit from ongoing, targeted professional learning opportunities that deepen their understanding of child development, curriculum design, and play-based instruction (LaRue & Kelly, 2015).

## 9. FOUR-YEAR-OLD KINDERGARTEN IS GOOD FOR SCHOOLS

Canada’s public education system enjoys a high level of public confidence. Among Anglo-American countries, Canada has the highest enrolment rate in publicly funded schools. By continuing to adapt to the evolving needs of families, schools can sustain and strengthen this confidence (Beach & Bertrand, 2009).

Combining four- and five-year-olds within a shared curricular environment is both developmentally and pedagogically sound. A common curriculum framework allows for consistent instructional materials, documentation processes, and teaching practices. This continuity enables educators to develop strong relationships with children and their families over time. Establishing these relationships at the outset of the school continuum has lasting benefits, particularly for marginalized families. The presence of younger children and families also helps transform schools into community learning centres, rather than institutions that separate children from families and the broader community.

Junior kindergarten can also play a critical role in sustaining small schools, particularly in rural and remote areas where the school may be the only remaining community resource. The 2017 task force report *Now Is the Time* identified 62 schools in Newfoundland and Labrador with fewer than 15 four- and five-year-old children, including 43 schools with fewer than five five-year-olds (Collins et al., 2017). In these communities, services for young children are limited, and private child care centres are often not financially viable.

In such contexts, the marginal cost of delivering a combined two-year preschool program within existing schools is minimal, while the potential impact is substantial. Schools are located in every neighbourhood and frequently offer suitable space and supportive infrastructure that are unavailable elsewhere in the community. Strategic investment in school-based infrastructure creates opportunities to improve efficiency, reduce service gaps and duplication, expand access, and strengthen quality and accountability.

## 10. TWO-YEAR KINDERGARTEN CAN BENEFIT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SECTOR

Providing two years of kindergarten creates an opportunity to re-engineer the delivery of early childhood and family services. When four- and five-year-old children are enrolled in full-day kindergarten, child care systems can redirect capacity toward serving younger children and supporting families with infants and toddlers (McCain, Mustard & McCuaig, 2011).

Full-day kindergarten has also expanded employment opportunities for early childhood educators (ECEs), strengthening the viability of the early years as a professional career pathway and helping to attract and retain qualified practitioners within the sector.

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