



Advisory Council on the
Status of Women

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February 6, 2009

Patricia J. Mella
Public Kindergarten Commissioner
Executive Council Office
95 Rochford Street
P.O. Box 2000
Charlottetown, PE
Canada C1A 7N8

Dear Ms. Mella:

Representatives from the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women were able to attend the recent Charlottetown information session on your work as PEI's Public Kindergarten Commissioner, and we would like to thank you and the colleagues working with you for your diligent work on the topic. The consultation you've done with early childhood educators and the organizations that represent them has crucially informed your work so far, and we are happy that you are continuing to seek input from parents and citizens to help shape your recommendations for the transition of kindergarten into the public school system.

Last year, our Council identified some positive directions to support early childhood development in the province, notably the move of Early Childhood Development into the Department of Education and the new play-based kindergarten curriculum. We were concerned that government failed to consult with early childhood educators, parents, and citizens prior to the decision to move kindergarten into the public school system: this decision left too many questions unanswered and too many concerns unaddressed. We respect the challenge you have taken on to answer many of these questions and allay many of these concerns. Your information session was a great help.

While you outlined the many challenges involved in the transition period for drawing kindergarten programs into the schools, it is clear that addressing these challenges will potentially make our schools better for all children and create opportunities for educators. We'd like to add our support for some of the recommendations your consultation and research point to.

OUR INTERESTS

Our interests are

- to ensure fairness for owner/operators of child-care centres (mostly women) who in many cases created and built kindergarten systems in absence of government commitment or adequate investment and who continue to offer child care and early childhood education that are essential to families but that are still drastically underfunded by governments.
- to ensure fairness for kindergarten teachers (mostly women) who choose to transition into the public school system.
- to ensure public schools maintain and build on the benefits to children we see in the current kindergarten systems, with small class sizes, an excellent and highly touted play-based curriculum, access to supports for children with special needs, and space, materials, and equipment to learn.
- to enhance the collective value we place on children in the early years, on accessible quality early childhood care and education, and on our collective understanding of early years development.
- to make our schools better places for children to learn and better places for communities, including parents and children, to come together and support children's and young people's development.

Women's continuing role caring for young children means that issues of early childhood care and education remain strongly intertwined with women's equality concerns. Supporting the work of early childhood care and education is important both to educators (most of whom are women) and parents in the workforce (a significant proportion of whom are women).

DELIVERY MODEL

Your sense from educators and research is that kindergarten should be full day, and in addition to looking at the best experiences for children, you were very sensitive in your analysis to the needs of women with young children who participate in the PEI workforce. **We recommend that kindergarten programs be full-day.**

Your research has shown that the most practical option is for kindergarten to be the mandatory school entry point (with some flexibility for parents to keep their child home an extra year if they choose). **We recommend that attendance at kindergarten be mandatory, but that the entry age fall within a reasonable range (for instance, from 4 years 8 months to 6 years old).**

RATIO

It was disconcerting to learn that in the current school system student to teacher ratios tend to be based on averages and practical considerations more than on children's developmental and academic requirements at various ages and stages. It was surprising to learn that in some provinces, kindergarten classes can range up to 22 students. The current kindergarten

maximum ratio of 12 students per teacher is optimal and worth maintaining. Early Childhood Educators have identified that the current curriculum is not possible to deliver with a ratio of more than 15 students per teacher. **We recommend that the maximum student to teacher ratio be set at 12, with a maximum of 15 to accommodate incoming new students, but with teacher assistants required the moment a kindergarten class becomes larger than 15 students.**

SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

You noted that supports and services for special needs children in kindergartens and schools are spread over two departments of government, and this causes difficulties for parents and challenges for children. **We recommend that government consult with parents and community organizations to examine the impacts of moving special-needs supports for children into the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.**

Your consultation with educators and parents of special needs children led you to observe discrepancies between what supports are currently available in kindergarten programs and what supports are available in the school system. You observed that this may create an argument for more supports and more assistance for all children with special needs in the public school system. This is an important observation.

We recommend that early interventions and early supports for children continue to receive ample resources.

Where supports and services for children currently in kindergarten are better than supports and services for children currently in the school system, we urge that government use the higher as the target (as developmentally appropriate to the children and their needs).

CURRICULUM

Your best information from educators and research suggests that the recently updated kindergarten curriculum is one of the best features of the Island kindergarten system. **We recommend that the current kindergarten curriculum be maintained, and that student-teacher ratios, space, materials, equipment, and learning resources that support this curriculum's delivery be given very high priority.**

STAFFING

Individual kindergarten teachers have invested their love, their time, their training, and their careers in teaching kindergarten. They have much knowledge and experience to offer the public school system. These teachers, so many of whom are women, must be given the option and opportunity to transition to working in the public school system. You were clear in your presentation that teachers who currently do not have a B.Ed. degree will need to make a commitment to pursue this credential if they choose to work in the public school system. You were also clear that their commitment must be matched by the school system's commitment

to hire them and admit them fully into the community of teachers, which includes union membership and protection, better salaries (compared to the current kindergarten system), in-service training, benefits, and eventual mobility within the school system.

Your observation is well taken that all teachers would benefit from greater training regarding early childhood development, and that university Education programs will likewise benefit from increased specialization in early childhood development (and other specializations).

We recommend a preferential hiring system for kindergarten teachers who wish to enter the school system and who commit to completing a Bachelor of Education program within a set number of years.

We further recommend that the preference for hiring current kindergarten teachers be in place for at least two years, to better include trained teachers who may be out of the workforce for caregiving reasons, or, in case of a surplus of teachers compared to school-system spaces, to give teachers who are unsuccessful in finding a place in the first year a second chance if spaces open.

We recommend that transitioning teachers be offered some funding for labour force readjustment and retraining to allow them to take full advantage of their studies towards their Bachelor of Education. (For instance, this may take the form of special days of leave for educational purposes, a stipend for textbooks and materials, funded access to high-speed Internet or facilities for distance learning, or other similar supports.)

We recommend that the Province explore funding opportunities through federal labour force readjustment programs currently moving to the Province.

IMPACTS

We appreciate your sensitivity to the many difficult choices that are going to face kindergarten teachers and the owner/operators of early childhood centres as a result of kindergarten moving into the public school system. We share your grave concern for the survival of early childhood centres and for access to early childhood care and education for families across the Island. We have in the past been strong advocates for provincial and nationwide systems for early childhood care and education and will continue to be so. The importance of high-quality, universal, affordable, accessible, and developmentally focused early childhood care and education to women's equality cannot be overstated.

We hope that your report will capture, in no uncertain terms, the importance of immediate and substantial government investment in the early childhood care and education system, which is currently characterized by uneven access to care, high costs to parents, and low-paid educators.

It is our hope that the Province will recognize and be able to access supports for educators through labour force adjustment programs which are devolving to the Provinces. Governments are planning for labour force changes in (frequently male-dominated) manufacturing and industrial sectors as they respond to recessionary conditions; likewise, government have a responsibility to plan for labour force changes in (frequently female-dominated) sectors such as early childhood care and education.

We recommend supports to early childhood centres that currently have kindergarten-aged children to assist them through the transition period and support their future sustainability.

We recommend an immediate investment in a funding program for centres to undertake strategic planning or business planning (or other facilitated processes they identify) that could help them prepare for a changed future.

We recommend that the Province explore labour force adjustment and retraining dollars to support educators and owner/operators to adjust to changing circumstances in their labour force.

We recommend that the owner/operators of any stand-alone kindergartens that have to close their doors are fully and fairly compensated.

The focus on kindergarten-age children has obviously shed a great deal of light on what we are doing well and what we could be doing better for children school-age and older. But what about younger children? As kindergarten moves into the public school system, our Council sees it as essential for government to keep the needs of young children in focus. **We recommend that after the transition of kindergarten into the public school system, an Early Childhood Development Commissioner quickly be appointed to consult with educators and parents and to recommend systemic supports for the care and development of all children in their early years.**

LOGISTICS

Like you, we are waiting to see what more comes of the current discussion of potential school closures to determine logistics for the transition of kindergarten. What is important to emphasize, however, is that **the logistics for kindergarten programs have to be in place as soon as possible in 2009 if kindergarten-aged children are entering the public school system in September 2010.** Parents, educators, and children must know at the earliest possible date which school their children will attend, what classrooms will accommodate their children, and which buses on what routes will take their children to school. When these logistics are announced, you can rely on parents to be active and vocal advocates for their children's safety and well-being and optimal learning environments.

LINKAGES

We agree with your observations that structured improvement will be needed in the linkages between parents and schools, between kindergarten and Grade One teachers, and (increasingly) between pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers. Within these linkages, communications about assessment will continue to be crucial.

Thank you for the work that you and the researchers working with you have put into the thorny questions of transition so far. We hope that this letter helps provide support for recommendations we see as important. If further consultation and research lead you in different directions with your recommendations, we are open to be persuaded by new information.

It will be important for decision-makers to act quickly on the recommendations your report makes; the implications for teachers, early childhood centres, parents, and children are very clear, and the time between now and September 2010 is very short. The Prince Edward Island Advisory Council on the Status of Women will watch the progress of your recommendations very carefully and will be strong advocates to government to ensure that good recommendations are implemented swiftly and to ensure that as soon as possible, every kindergarten teacher and parent of a kindergarten-aged child knows precisely where they will fit in the public school system in September 2010.

Thank you for the opportunity to learn about your findings so far and to provide these reflections on your emerging recommendations.

Sincerely,



Isabelle Christian
Chairperson