

## From Province House To Home October 5, 2007

Whether it's the crime on Halifax streets or bullying in our schools, it seems Nova Scotians have been talking a lot lately about our children and what kind of intervention is necessary to raise them to be healthy, well-adjusted adults. There's a lot of emphasis on programs for teens and pre-teens but I think we're missing a very important part of the solution.

Research has shown again and again that early intervention has the best chance of success for reaching at-risk kids. It gives them the best start, not only for their school years, but for their life later on as well. Our brains are made up of billions of highly integrated circuits, many of which are laid down before age five. The mastery of more complex skills relies on solid development at the most basic level. Essential skills like language, social and emotional functioning, motor skills and adaptive learning are all being developed and it is here, at this age, that nurturing is needed. Quality programming for our pre-schoolers is key to their success as they grow.

Right now the province is undertaking a successful pilot project in early childhood education. The pre-primary pilot program was initially slated for two years but was extended to three. It lets some Nova Scotia kids enter school at the age of four, giving them five hours a day where they learn simple life skills that help them set the stage for school. The program has been wildly successful in many parts of our province with far more parents wanting to take part than there is room. In Greenwood alone 50 parents applied for just 18 spaces. Teachers report constant positive feedback from parents, saying they hear comments like "it was the best thing I could ever have done for him." Staff talk about parents so eager for the program that one woman brought her child to and from school from a nearby town by public transport, taking the bus four times a day just to make sure her child got a positive start to school.

These examples, and many other stories of parents eager for this kind of learning environment, show just how important a universal early childhood education program would be to Nova Scotia kids. Nova Scotia can't afford to ignore the needs of its pre-schoolers.

The value of quality early childhood education has been proven repeatedly in research that go as far back as the sixties. A groundbreaking study from the United States followed children until they were forty. It showed participants who took the pre-school program earned more, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes and were more likely to have graduated high school. Long term studies have also looked at the

benefit-cost ratios showing a return of as high as 17 to 1. These are numbers we cannot afford to ignore. What is the cost of a one year education program compared to the return of a lower youth crime and a more educated, committed workforce?

I propose Nova Scotia implement a universal, voluntary pre-primary program for our kids. It would be based on the valuable work already being done at 20 different sites in the province. The play-based program would teach socialization skills and help encourage independent learning. While current regulations mean we can't offer bussing to four year olds, a voluntary program would mean parents who are able to make arrangements could opt in as they desire, giving their kids the best start possible. Within five years we could have a universal program accessible to all kids no matter what their income or location.

I don't want to take anything away from the current pre-school options in our province. We have strong private and non-profit sector programs but our children deserve another option. Some people simply can't afford private pre-school or they can't find a space and that is not acceptable. We have the teachers and we have students, we just need the program. The evidence shows this is not an option; it is a fundamental part of building a healthy society. Making pre-primary as common as kindergarten is a smart investment. The question is not about whether we should be doing this, it's a question of why aren't we. As a province we simply can't afford not to meet the needs of our youngest citizens.