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StrongStart Centre Initiative

As education leaders, we all know how important the early years are for our students' success in school. Although we don't usually see them until Kindergarten, the time between birth and school-age is a critical learning period in every child's life. The early learning experiences children have influence their success in primary schooling and set the stage for life-long learning.

So, what does early learning mean? We are using this term to describe the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that our young children attain in the key developmental domains: cognitive, physical, language and communication, and social/emotional. We know that children who are vulnerable in one or more of these areas are less likely to be successful in Kindergarten and the early grades in school.

Many schools and districts have figured this out long ago and joined with their community to create programs for families and young children. We know about an array of innovative programs across the province. We added to this mix three years ago with funding and materials for *Ready, Set, Learn* to strengthen the early positive relationship between families of young children and schools and to help parents prepare their children for success in Kindergarten. Now the Ministry is partnering with school districts to create StrongStart early learning centres, which will provide another opportunity for schools to support children's early learning.

We all know that declining enrolment has meant empty space in schools. This creates an opportunity to use some of these spaces for community activities, and high on my list are StrongStart centres.

This school year, we have invited a number of school districts to pilot StrongStart early learning centres. These centres are not child care or typical preschools. Children who attend quality child care and preschools are already benefiting from early learning supports. StrongStart

early learning centres are parent/caregiver participation programs for children who are cared for in homes during the day, particularly vulnerable families. Parents or caregivers who are responsible for children under Kindergarten age during the day visit StrongStart Centres with their preschool children on a drop-in basis. Both the children and the caregivers benefit from the learning that takes place there.

The centres are modeled on the family literacy centres introduced in Burnaby School District. Learning is the central purpose, both for the children and their parents/caregivers. StrongStart centre activities address pre-literacy skills development through language-rich environments and purposeful play. But make no mistake: these are not "literacy boot camps" for little ones. The programs are designed to address all domains of child development in a play-based environment.

StrongStart centres are open three hours a day, five days a week during the school year—some have even decided to remain open during portions of the summer to help kids get ready for Kindergarten. The activities focus on children age 3-4, but parents attending a StrongStart centre typically bring their young children of any age to these family-friendly environments. They create a great focal point for other services and information to reach families. We hear from pilots that their centres are also places where isolated parents or grandparents can make connections and friendships. The adults who participate with their children can pick up early learning strategies they can replicate at home

In the next few weeks we will be expanding this opportunity more broadly for next year. School District Superintendents will be the point of contact for further expansion. The pilot sites that are up and running are listed on our Early Learning webpage at www.bced.gov.bc.ca/literacy/early_learning/



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