

In 2008, Step Ahead Bath Family Learning Center became one of 4 Early Childhood Development sites to be located in public schools as part of a pilot project aimed at creating a system where early childhood services could be accessed in a central location in the community. The idea was that these centres would become neighbourhood “hubs” where services could be accessed in an integrated way. The strategic placement of these centers in schools would also allow for an easier transition into the public school system.

Since our inception, Step Ahead has served hundreds of children and families, providing preschool, full and part-time daycare, and an afterschool childcare program. The convenience and safety of having your child be able to walk from their classroom to their afterschool program is something that has been a huge asset to our parents. Parents who have to work early can drop their children off and know that when it is time for school to start, their classroom is only seconds away. Our excellent 3 and 4 year old preschool programs are helping children become familiarized with the school environment where they will be attending the next year. Many children from nearby communities choose to attend our preschool program as well. The Kindergarten teachers talk about the level of comfort the children have when coming to Kindergarten the following fall. Much of the usual anxiety of entering a new environment and leaving parents is alleviated. The transition from home to school becomes much smoother.

Additionally, we have partnered with a variety of service providers, such as Public Health, Talk With Me Early Languages Services, the Healthy Baby and Me program, Valley Family Resource, Mental Health, Family and Early Childhood West and Social Development to name just a few. We have offered programming related to healthy eating, Food mentoring, parenting, children’s mental health, just to name a few.

Original funding came from the Provincial Government as well as the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation. The goal was for all centers to be self-sustaining by the end of year three; Step Ahead had succeeded at this by the end of the first year. Nine years later we were still sustainable, but then the renovations to the Bath Community School began and we had to give up our 2-5 year old daycare room, preschool space, as well as shared after school and community space.

We are not simply an independent business. We are here because our government saw there was a need to improve the state of Early childhood development in New Brunswick. We are part of the Education system, under the umbrella of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Since our move to this school over a year and a half ago, we, like the rest of the school, have encountered challenges – mostly financial and space-related. At the other school, we were licensed for 60 children; in our current location, we are licensed for only 41, which translates to our bottom line. We are a non-profit organization and it has been difficult to make ends meet with the decrease in revenue due to our limited space.

We have also lost space that was once available to outside service providers, so we have been limited in the amount of extra programming we can offer. We share a 3-stall bathroom with middle school students, and though they are wonderful and patient, it's not easy when you have to bring all of your little people with you to the bathroom to change a diaper and there are 14 middle school girls trying to share 3 stalls in order to change for gym class. Did I mention that the middle school students have no changing rooms? Our 2-5 year old daycare children used to be able to all share a space in one big room; however, since the move, we actually have 2 smaller rooms for our daycare where the children are split into 2 groups of 10 children, which decreases the amount of interaction between children. Do our fantastic Early Childhood Educators make the best of it? They sure do. However, when we moved, we were told this would be only for a year. We knew we were going to be a bit cramped and take a financial hit, but we knew we could manage for 1 year. Going on close to 2 now, and everyone is really hoping to be back in their original home soon.

Also, there is a strong potential to add an infant room were we to be back in the bigger school. There is huge demand for infant space everywhere and this would definitely meet yet another need in our community.

In 2017, the Government of New Brunswick set forth a 10 year plan with 9 key objectives aimed at improving the stability and future of education in our province. In his address at the beginning of the paper, the Education Minister writes, “We are committed to a rising tide of excellence in New Brunswick’s **early learning and education system...**”

“...education is not only a priority for our **early learning and education system**, but also for the entire population.”

“This is a very exciting time in **early learning and education...**”

You very clearly see the inclusion of early learning in the Education system. This center is precisely who the 10 Year Plan is talking about in Objective 2, which states, “Ensure all pre-school children develop the competencies they need to be successful in school and in life.”

Also, a recent green paper aimed at transforming education in New Brunswick, “Succeeding at Home: A green paper on education in New Brunswick” reiterates the need for quality early learning experiences for all children. To quote from it, “This green paper offers ideas on how to make **our education system, from birth to high school graduation**, the best in the world..”

We are part of this school, we are part of the education system in New Brunswick. We **ARE NOT** an independent business.

In closing, I hope that the message you have heard is that Step Ahead Bath Family Learning Center is an important and integral part of Bath and its surrounding areas. We are part of Bath Community School and we are most definitely an important piece of the New Brunswick Education System. 5 years ago, you supported our whole school and made the recommendation to do what was needed to keep us in the building that would best serve all our children. We thank you for that. I ask that you, once again, support us and recommend that our original school be finished so that we can go ahead with serving our children in a building that they deserve and that meets the needs of EVERYONE.