

Childcare: Foundational to a Healthy Community  
Final Report on The Need for Childcare in Antigonish, Nova Scotia

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## **Summary**

The need for childcare spaces currently in the Antigonish area is more than double the current capacity of 214, at about 532 spaces, a gap of 318 spaces. This gap is projected to persist though the coming 10 years, with projections ranging from 184 to 240 additional spaces needed in 10 years' time, reflecting a predicted decline in population.

After-school care for 5–12-year-olds is also greatly lacking, with only 133 spaces available this fall, an increase of 48 spaces from last school year. Wait lists in July 2024 ranged from 68 at a regulated childcare centre to 100 at AEC, with many parents indicating that they didn't bother with waitlists in favour of creating alternate arrangements.

Current daycares have no plans to expand, and one director indicated that they would be retiring within 5 years. Barriers to expansion included being a private facility with financial barriers and staffing shortages.

Unlicensed care, either in the home or the provider's home, is a common solution for parents in the area, but we were unable to engage unlicensed providers in dialogue either in-person or through anonymous surveys, and so were unable to estimate the extent and availability of this solution. From the survey, this is often accessed through word of mouth, making it difficult solution for many newcomers.

Solutions proposed include:

1. Create more regulated daycare spaces: explore community partnerships, available buildings, and land. Create a nanny service for 0-18 months infants to be cared for in their homes.
2. Address existing barriers to growth in existing childcare centers: staffing, waitlists, cultural sensitivity and inclusion.
3. Support healthcare professionals: specific processes and decisions that would target supporting those working in healthcare.
4. Enhance and diversify programming to reflect global best practices in early childhood care and education.
5. Engage the community to better assess local needs; Continue to monitor need using new data locally and from StatsCan as it becomes available.

## **Overview**

This report outlines the pressing need for childcare services in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, focusing on the intersection of healthcare impacts, recruitment and retention of

healthcare professionals, family stress, cultural considerations, and the important role of a diverse, inclusive and high-quality educational setting.

Included in this report are population statistics addressing the current demand for early years care, after-school care for school-aged children, waitlists, and projections for what childcare may look like in 5 and 10 years. Two surveys reflecting childcare needs were conducted for this report. “Childcare Directors/Owners Anonymous Survey” (CD Survey), reflects current capacity and demand, as well as details on waitlists, demographics, after-school programs and directors’ future plans. The second survey, “Child Care Needs Assessment” (CNA Survey), is an anonymous community survey that gathered input from 262 families in the area, addressing the childcare need and aimed to gather information on various aspects of childcare, including a family's current situation, preferences, challenges, and priorities. Other data included came from StatsCanada (census reports, population statistics, immigration reports) and St Martha’s Regional Hospital (SMRH) birth data.

A literature review of global best practices in childcare was conducted, showing the need for arts-based and culturally sensitive local programming as the best-practice in early childhood care and education to optimize social and emotional learning.

In conclusion, this report examines potential solutions to the childcare crisis facing our community. By highlighting these strategies, we aim to inspire a forward-looking plan that supports families and emphasizes the significance of this urgent issue in our community.

## **Introduction**

Antigonish, a vibrant and expanding community in Nova Scotia, is currently struggling with a profound childcare crisis that affects families, healthcare professionals, and the overall well-being of the community. As the population becomes increasingly diverse, the demand for high-quality childcare services has surged, resulting in lengthy waitlists and limited availability. This shortage has left many parents unable to return to work, contributing to elevated levels of family stress and instability.

The urgency of addressing this issue is further emphasized by the pivotal role that childcare plays in fostering positive family dynamics, enhancing workforce participation, and promoting community health. Access to reliable childcare not only supports parents in their professional roles but also nurtures the development and well-being of children, ultimately benefiting the entire community. The growing demand for early-years childcare and after-school care for children must be recognized, addressed, and enhanced.

As families increasingly rely on these services, it is essential to invest in, and improve the quality and accessibility of, childcare options. Recognizing this need will not only improve the pressures faced by working parents but will also foster a supportive environment for children’s development. Quality early-years care promotes cognitive,

social, and emotional growth, laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning. Similarly, engaging after-school programs provide children with enriching activities and promote socialization. Improving access to early-years and after-school care is crucial for building a thriving, resilient community that prioritizes the needs of its children and families.

### **Current Demographics and Demand**

Recent population statistics reveal a pressing demand for current early years care and school-aged after-school programs. According to local data, a significant portion of families in Antigonish are struggling to find adequate childcare options, which has resulted in lengthy waitlists. The shortage is particularly relevant for infants and toddlers, where the demand far exceeds the available spaces. Projections for the next five to ten years suggest that this demand will remain significant, driven by demographic trends, economic factors, plans of current regulated centres and the growing recognition of the importance of early childhood education.

Currently, the Antigonish population of children aged 0-4, is about 902. The government has determined that 59% of this population need childcare spaces, so about 532 spaces are currently needed. From the CD Survey completed in July 2024, there is a current capacity of 214 spaces for ages 0-4 years in regulated early years centers. This is broken down to:

**Infants:** 16 spaces (only 2 out of 5 centers in town have infant spaces)

**Toddler:** 83 spaces. However, a few were part-time, and some toddlers should have been in the preschooler group but couldn't move there due to lack of spots and staff shortages.

**Preschoolers:** 107 spaces (on paper). However, there were 102 spaces this past academic year (2023/2024) due to lack of staff for some centers resulting in their not being at full capacity. Also, 11 of the 107 preschoolers participated in a blended program with pre-primary, thereby occupying full-time spots.

As explained in the notes, these numbers do not reflect full capacity due to several barriers preventing centers from operating at their maximum capacity. These barriers include a lack of staff and supervisors needed to maintain required ratios, a shortage of qualified early childhood educators (ECEs), and insufficient space to transition children to the next age group.

In considering the need for spaces for children aged 0-4 years, there are currently 214 available spots across five regulated early years centers in Antigonish, despite an assumed need for 532 spaces. Population statistical data clearly indicates that our community is experiencing a childcare crisis and requires additional spaces.

Moreover, there is strong evidence of a similar crisis regarding after-school care and programs for school-aged children. According to the CD Survey conducted in July 2024, there were then only 61 after-school spaces available (if fully staffed) in three regulated daycare centers in town and one 24-child cohort at AEC. There are presently

(September 2024) two new programs: 24 children enrolled at St. Andrews Consolidated School and a second cohort of 24 children (pending staffing to be at capacity) at Antigonish Education Centre. This results in a total of only 133 available spaces for after-school care, contingent on having sufficient staff to support them to be at full capacity. There is also the caveat that 12 of these spaces may be converted to toddler care at the new YMCA /Cormier site. The CNA Survey indicated that 68 school-aged children were on a waitlist for after-school care at a regulated daycare center, and over 100 children were on the waitlist for after-school programming at Antigonish Education Centre. This highlights a significant demand for after-school programming, not only for care and supervision but also for a variety of engaging and creative activities for school-aged children.

**Projections:**

A part of the research is establishing projections for 5- and 10-year childcare needs in Antigonish. The charts below represent projections derived from population statistics, census reports, immigration reports, and current numerical data demonstrating current need and capacities. (See appendix sections for calculations of numbers used). There are two total population (0-5 years) scenarios for each of in 5- and in 10- years' time.

Scenario 1 Need Assessment by Age Group 2029:

	2029 Predicted Total 0-5 years Population	Current Available Spots in Licensed Regulated Centers	Spots to Meet 56% Canadian Average <a href="#">Childcare Arrangements</a>	Additional Spots Required
	882			
0-18 months	264	16	107	91
18 - 35 months	264	83	148	65
3 - 5 years	353	104	198	94
<b>Total Additional Spots:</b>				<b>250</b>

\*Population distribution assumes an equal distribution across all ages. It also assumes an equal need for aged 18 months to 5 years. 0-18 months applies an additional 28% reduction in need because of parents staying at home through parental leave according to Statistics Canada ([Childcare Arrangements](#)).

Scenario 2 Need Assessment by Age Group 2029:

	2029 Predicted Total 0-5 years Population	Current Available Spots in Licensed Regulated Centers	Spots to Meet 56% Canadian Average <a href="#">Childcare Arrangements</a>	Additional Spots Required
	798			
0-18 months	239	16	97	81
18 - 35 months	239	83	134	51
3 - 5 years	319	104	179	75
<b>Total Additional Spots:</b>				<b>207</b>

Scenario 1 Need Assessment by Age Group 2034:

	2034 Predicted Total 0-5 years Population	Current Available Spots in Licensed Regulated Centers	Spots to Meet 56% Canadian Average <a href="#">Childcare Arrangements</a>	Additional Spots Required
	864			
0-18 months	259	16	104	88
18 - 35 months	259	83	145	62
3 - 5 years	346	104	194	90

<b>Total Additional Spots</b>	<b>240</b>
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**Scenario 2 Need Assessment by Age Group 2034:**

	2034 Predicted Total 0-5 years Population	Current Available Spots in Licensed Regulated Centers	Spots to Meet 56% Canadian Average <a href="#">Childcare Arrangements</a>	Additional Spots Required
	756			
0-18 months	227	16	91	75
18 - 35 months	227	83	127	44
3 - 5 years	302	104	169	65
<b>Total Additional Spots</b>				<b>184</b>

The projections for childcare needs in Antigonish over the next 5 to 10 years represent a significant demand for additional childcare spaces, reflecting the community's population statistics and trends. Based on various sources, including population statistics, census reports, birth data from St. Martha's Regional Hospital (SMRH), and immigration data, the assessments indicate that by 2029, although the total estimated population for children under 5 years could decline to 882, there will still be a notable continued need for childcare arrangements across age groups.

In the first scenario, an analysis reveals that an additional 250 spots will be required to meet the Canadian average of 56% capacity utilization in licensed regulated centers. Similarly, by 2034, even with a slight decrease in the predicted population for children ages 0 to 4, to 864, the need for childcare remains substantial, requiring a minimum of 240 spots.

The second scenario projects a lower population, forecasting 798 by 2029 and 756 by 2034, yet it still highlights the necessity for increased capacity from the current childcare spaces. In this scenario, an additional 207 spots (not including current capacity spaces), will be required in 2029, and 184 spots by 2034. This demonstrates that regardless of population fluctuations, the demand for childcare will persist.

With the current available spots far below the projected needs, Antigonish faces a critical crisis in childcare that must be addressed. Meeting these future demands will be

essential for supporting families and fostering a thriving community (for detailed explanations and references, please see the appendix and reference sections).

### **Future Capacity Plans:**

The following research was collected through interviews and the CD Anonymous Survey. There are five regulated childcare centers in the area, with four directors responding to the survey, while all five participated in interviews and provided additional insights. The research aimed to assess plans for these centers, including potential space expansion and the barriers to achieving such growth.

Regarding current capacity for expansion, all five centers in the Antigonish area indicated that they have no plans to expand at this time. The YMCA Pictou has partnered with Cormier Play and Learn, although no specific expansion plans for early years spaces have been outlined. One center expressed interest in expanding but noted that being a private facility, they face restrictive policies that prevent growth. Another center is transitioning to become a provider of an after-school program at St. Andrews Consolidated School. Previously, this center offered after-school care only for staff children during in-service days and school closures, but they are providing 24 spots for one cohort beginning this fall.

Barriers for daycares to grow and develop were also identified. One center reported that its private status limits expansion opportunities, while staffing shortages emerged as a common challenge for several centers, explaining their inability to operate at full capacity.

Regarding timelines for retirement or closure, three out of five regulated daycares indicated they would remain open and maintain their current position. One director mentioned plans to leave within the next five years, while the status of one center remains uncertain.

### **Unlicensed Care:**

Based on the CNA Survey that gathered 262 family responses, the chart below illustrates the care arrangements for children 0 to 4 years who do not attend regulated centers. Although a source indicated that there are approximately 80 home care providers in Antigonish town and county, accurate data has yet to be confirmed.

Attempts to engage local home childcare providers through both a community survey reflecting home childcare and community informative meetings for home childcare providers, have resulted in a low response rate. This suggests that while there are a significant number of unregulated home care providers in the area, their participation in these initiatives has been limited.

Unregulated providers are not eligible for government subsidies, which allows them to charge an average fee of approximately \$40-45 per day, per child. Families reported

that they often have no choice but to rely on home care providers due to the lack of availability in regulated centers, resulting in substantial childcare expenses. The chart below presents data from the CNA Survey, detailing where children ages 0-4 years, who are not in regulated daycares, are placed for care during the day.

Unlicensed Daycare	Home Child Care Provider (In provider's home)	Caregiver/Nanny (In Family Home)	Family Member/ Friend
5	39	7	62

**Summer Months:**

Based on the CD Survey, two out of four daycares that responded to the survey, close during the summer months. This situation leaves many working professional families without childcare options. The reasons mentioned for these closures include staffing barriers, staff burnout, the need for renovations and repairs, and in some cases, low demand for childcare.

From the CNA Survey (responses from 262 families), a significant number of parents expressed their disappointment with the closures of regulated centers during July and August, creating stress for families seeking care. One center in the area chose to close for the summer months but created summer camps for early years and school-aged children. However, some families from their center were disappointed with this plan, as their children were then without care for the full summer and the fees were higher for the camps than for the regulated daycare throughout the rest of the year.

Ninety out of 262 respondents indicated they are “very dissatisfied” with the current childcare options, while 46 respondents reported being “dissatisfied,” and 136 expressed overall unhappiness with available options. Open-ended questions in the survey aimed to gather insights into families' dissatisfaction and their perceptions of how the system is failing them. Many families highlighted their concerns about the summer closures, noting that they often save vacation time throughout the year to accommodate the need to stay home with their children during this period. Another source of frustration for families is the lengthy waiting lists for childcare.

**Wait Lists Procedures:**

As of July 2024, there were a total of 309 children on one of the waitlists for a regulated childcare center in Antigonish and over 100 children awaiting placement in an after-school program associated with Antigonish Education Centre (prior to the opening a second 24-child cohort there this fall). We have assumed that those on waitlists for other daycares and other after-school care are duplicates from this list. Among the 175 respondents to the survey who responded to this question:

- 28.6% reported they are not currently on any waitlist.
- Of the 125 respondents who are on waitlists:
  - 20.8% are on only one waitlist.
  - 79.2% are on two or more waitlists.

The largest waitlist in Antigonish is associated with Cormier Play and Learn/YMCA Pictou, which had 309 spots as of July 2024.

Families voiced concerns regarding the waitlist procedures at regulated centres in the area, questioning the transparency and fairness of the system. Many families reported going years without being contacted or updated on their status and expressed discontent with the system of prioritizing siblings of currently enrolled children and expectant mothers over those who have been on the waitlists for an extended period. This prioritization often forces families to make early and stressful decisions regarding childcare. Many parents feel compelled to secure daycare spots well in advance—some even contacting centers when they are considering pregnancy to hold a spot for a year or two ahead of time. Families strongly believe that the waitlist procedures need to be re-evaluated and revised to better serve the needs of those waiting for childcare.

### **Impact on Healthcare Professionals and Community**

The intersection of childcare availability and the sustainability of the healthcare workforce is a central focus of this report. Antigonish is home to a dedicated community of healthcare professionals, many of whom are also parents. The limited availability of childcare options presents significant challenges for these workers, impacting their ability to effectively balance their professional duties with family obligations. This crisis not only places stress on healthcare workers but also has far-reaching implications for the recruitment and retention of medical staff. Potential candidates often prioritize communities that offer family support systems, including accessible and reliable regulated childcare and flexible diverse programs for youth after school. Without such resources, Antigonish risks losing qualified professionals to other regions that better accommodate the needs of working families. Factors such as space availability, hours of operations for childcare, flexibility for shift workers and weekend options, are all concerns brought up by health care professionals in the area.

Out of the 262 respondents to the community survey, 80 families identified as having at least one parent/caregiver working as a healthcare professional. However, there is no accessible data from the hospital's HR department and other businesses within the sector reflecting the number of families with dependents and regarding the number of healthcare professionals in need of childcare. Research within healthcare, focusing on physicians, has revealed that at least 29 physician families have dependents under the age of 13. Of these, 21 children are under the age of 4, while 32 children are between the ages of 5 and 13. The physician recruitment team has informed us that many physicians and other healthcare professionals have left our community due to a lack of childcare options. Additionally, the physician recruitment and retention team have identified that the limited accessibility and availability of childcare in Antigonish is a significant barrier to recruiting new physicians.

The impacts of the lack of childcare on healthcare professionals are significant. Some healthcare workers are unable to return to their jobs, while others can only return part-time. Many healthcare professionals have found it necessary to leave Antigonish and relocate to areas where they have family support. Those who do return to work often arrive feeling stressed and burnt out, with ongoing family pressures affecting their well-being. Some must drive long distances to find childcare, leading to scenarios where they work from their cars or local cafés. Physicians, in particular, struggle with scheduling, often unable to return to work as planned due to childcare challenges. This creates additional stress, as many express dissatisfaction with family life, while spouses are forced to remain at home because they cannot find adequate care for their children. This can lead to physicians not returning to work, resulting in a lack of care in the healthcare sector in Antigonish and, consequently, a shortage of medical support for the community, which requires their services and increases wait times for appointments. Currently, with Nova Scotia Health there are 7 job opportunities for physicians in our area ([morethanmedicine.ca](https://morethanmedicine.ca)). There is also a new collaborative healthcare clinic that is being built with plans on opening in 2025. According to the Department of Health and Wellness, “the centre will accommodate and recruit more than 30 healthcare professionals and support staff” (<https://shorturl.at/flf7K>). The community is eager to see the centre open and to be able to employ healthcare professionals so that it can reach its full capacity, which is expected to benefit approximately 10,000 patients. There is also development in the coming years of another healthcare centre, Sugarloaf Medical Clinic, that will create office space for up to 7 doctors and partner with Affordable Housing to create “50 new units in phase 1 and perhaps another 50 units in phase 2” (<https://shorturl.at/qCn6H>).

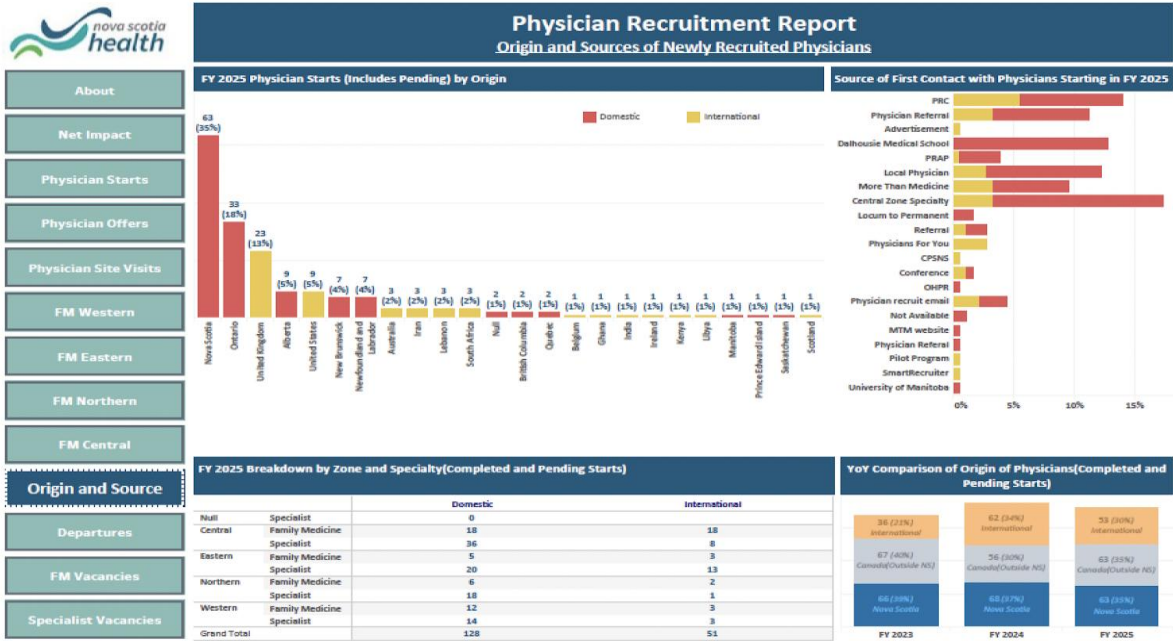
Supporting the growth of healthcare is essential for the needs of the residents of Antigonish and the surrounding communities, as it also contributes to the development of affordable housing and accommodates the population increase in the area. Enhancing childcare availability would not only support the well-being of healthcare workers but also contribute to improved patient care and community health outcomes.

By creating a more supportive environment for families, Antigonish can strengthen its healthcare workforce, ultimately benefiting both the professionals and the families they serve. Addressing this critical issue is essential for fostering a resilient healthcare system and ensuring long-term benefits for the community.

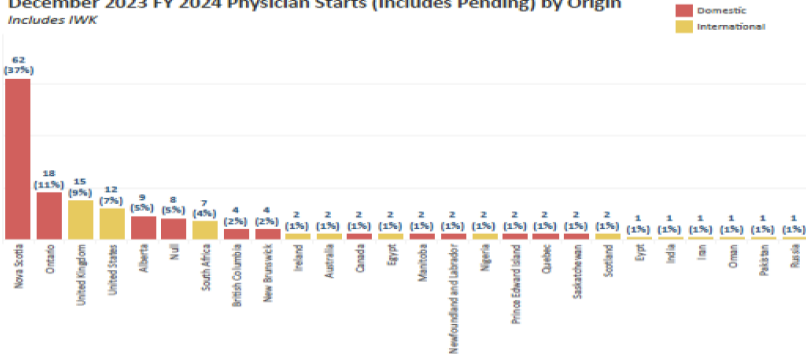
### **Cultural Considerations in Healthcare, Child Care and Community**

The Antigonish area is home to a diversity of physicians and healthcare professionals from around the globe. The NSHealth physician recruitment report from December 2023 (see chart below) highlights the recruitment to NS of Muslim families from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan, alongside doctors from India, Nigeria, and South Africa. Additionally, healthcare professionals from Kenya and the Philippines enrich the local healthcare sector. New families in Antigonish are experiencing increasing stress as they navigate work and childcare responsibilities, which adversely

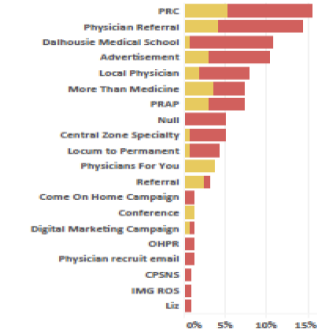
affect their overall well-being and mental health. For families moving to Antigonish from abroad, the transition can feel isolating, particularly without family support and the challenge of finding a sense of belonging in a new community. It is crucial to identify cultural considerations in childcare; establishing an inclusive and culturally competent childcare environment not only supports children's development but also fosters community connection, ensuring that all families feel respected and valued. Researching and integrating cultural considerations within childcare settings is necessary for creating a supportive atmosphere for all families and reflecting an environment that follows global best practices.



December 2023 FY 2024 Physician Starts (Includes Pending) by Origin  
Includes IWK



Source of First Contact with Physicians Starting in FY 2024



FY 2024 Breakdown by Zone and Specialty

		Domestic	International
Central	Family Medicine	11	7
	Specialist	36	7
Eastern	Family Medicine	4	3
	Specialist	17	19
Northern	Family Medicine	7	1
	Specialist	9	4
Western	Family Medicine	11	5
	Specialist	22	4
Grand Total		117	50

## Global Best Practices and the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework

In addition to estimating local needs, this research project explored global best practices in childcare, drawing on successful models from various regions that could be adapted for Antigonish, that would lead to profound benefits for the development and learning journeys of our youth. It is important to recognize that by reflecting on existing successful practices worldwide, educators can purposefully integrate these strategies to foster a more effective and engaging learning environment. Understanding and applying these globally recognized methods can lead to improved educational outcomes, preparing students for a rapidly changing world and equipping them with the skills necessary for future success and forming connections within their growing community.

For instance, countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden and Denmark emphasize outdoor learning and play-based education, allowing children to explore their environment while developing social and cognitive skills. Utilizing outdoor spaces for learning promotes physical activity, exploration of nature, and hands-on experiences that are vital for young children's development.

The national curriculum of New Zealand takes pride in incorporating a world recognized program that is known as one of the best practices globally. The National curriculum, Te Whāriki, is a unique program and philosophy that embraces a bicultural framework, reflecting New Zealand's commitment to nurturing children as competent and confident learners; students are assessed through tools by educators on their identity, language, and culture. Like Canada, New Zealand's diverse society includes a multitude of cultures and ethnicities. Te Whāriki promotes the growth of identity, language, and culture for all children and fosters adaptability, creativity, and resilience, equipping children with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes essential for lifelong learning and

engagement with future challenges and opportunities (Te Whāriki, Early Childhood Curriculum, Ministry of Education). The Te Whāriki curriculum and the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework share a commitment to fostering strong identities, cultural awareness, and inclusive learning environments.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Curriculum is a globally recognized program reflecting child-led learning and an approach based on child-led inquiry and building new knowledge upon one's prior knowledge, while forming personal life skills, like the Nova Scotia Framework "that is based on an image of a child who is curious, creative, full of potential, capable and confident." (Capable, Confident, and Curious: Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework, 2018, pp- 3).

The IB program is now implemented in schools across Nova Scotia in High Schools. Both the IB and Te Whāriki frameworks emphasize the importance of recognizing and valuing the unique backgrounds of all children, which can enhance their sense of belonging and confidence. In Nova Scotia, acknowledging the founding cultures, including Mi'kmaq, French, Acadian and African, aligns with Te Whāriki's bicultural focus. By integrating local cultural narratives, traditions, arts and languages into early learning experiences, this approach not only honors the diverse cultural landscape of Nova Scotia but also promotes respect and understanding among children from different backgrounds. The IB and the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Frameworks share a strong emphasis on child-led learning, making them complementary in their educational philosophies. Both frameworks prioritize the importance of nurturing children as active participants in their own learning journeys, allowing them to explore their interests and develop critical thinking skills. In the IB program, inquiry-based learning is central, encouraging students to ask questions, investigate, and engage deeply with topics. This aligns well with the Nova Scotia framework, which supports experiential, play-based learning that is responsive to children's individual needs and interests. By fostering an environment where children can lead their learning, both visions promote autonomy, creativity, and a sense of agency. For example, the IB's focus on international mindedness can enrich children's understanding of diverse cultures and global issues, aligning with the Nova Scotia framework's emphasis on local culture and community connections. Incorporating global best practices into new educational programs offers significant benefits that can enhance the learning experience.

Reflecting on community connection, "Nova Scotia's early learning framework is a social pedagogical framework that emphasizes relationships and experiences. It builds on developmental and socio-cultural perspectives and emphasizes the need for fairness, justice and equity for all children" (Capable, Curious and Confident, pp-11). The benefits of involving community and building relationships with other members of a community is currently a global best practice branching off world renowned programs. Building partnerships with local organizations and resources enriches the learning environment and provides additional support for children and families.

Intergenerational environments are making significant benefits across the world. Educational practices that combine student and senior collaborations within communities are growing rapidly globally. Research from the journal, *Annales Medico-Psychologiques* suggests that the advantages for the elderly include enhanced positive emotions, engagement in activities, and improved self-esteem. Children also gain from these intergenerational programs, especially by developing a deeper understanding of the strengths and limitations of older adults, which develops greater empathy towards them. Working together and participating in activities like gardening, visual arts, music, and games benefit individuals of all ages (Perron, 2022). With at least five senior facilities in the Antigonish area, there would be significant positive benefits to integrate these systems together as research and global best practices suggest. “Data collected from the interviews indicated that while individuals favored various intergenerational programs, most of these activities were focused under three main categories: art making, food-related activities, and shared outdoor activities. Participants described writing scripts, performing personal stories, playing musical instruments, dancing, creating hand puppets, sewing a quilt, and learning computer programs.” (Norouzi N, 2023). There is research to support the practices of intergenerational educational environments and incorporating senior and retiree involvement within educational programs. This is an important consideration for Antigonish in the development and growth of the healthcare system, in the well-being of the community, and in linking childcare and educational programs.

### **The Role of the Arts within Education and Development**

The influence of global best models and visions not only prioritize children's well-being but also foster their resilience and creativity. Research on global best practices in childcare emphasizes the essential role of the arts in education and how creative programming—such as music, visual arts, and theater, to name a few—can significantly enhance childhood development.

Implementing an arts-based framework within an early years' program and school-aged program that stems from student's personal interests, is leading globally in best practices within educational environments. Engagement in the arts promotes and builds critical skills in young learners, including social skills, emotional expression, and collaboration. Art develops many areas of learning such as confidence, imagination, communication, fine and gross motor skills, social and emotional skills, as well as problem solving (Bryant 2017). Barnes (2002) states that art and play are no different than any other subjects in a curriculum and should be an equal focus for educators, as we need creativity for motivation. Starko (2017) suggests that for students, combining creativity with intrinsic motivation is key for discovery and learning. Sokolowski (2022), states that the arts influence one's social emergence, cultural understandings, support systems, as well as playing a role in growth mindset. Areas of development that benefit through the arts are confidence, self-esteem, transferable lifelong skills, inclusivity, personal growth, creativity and imagination.

Additionally, the arts promote emotional intelligence and resilience, helping children navigate their feelings and experiences. Research by Griebing (2011) concluded that children can recognize their potential and gain insight on their capabilities through the arts. “An essential part of preparing students for life is helping them see that life is interesting and filled with the potential for joy. One way we do that is we help them experience creativity” (Starko 2017, p. 10).

Through promoting engagement and nurturing interests, educators can expose students to experiences that ignite joy and curiosity, encouraging them to explore further. As adults we choose to engage in activities that spark happiness and joy as well as activities we can relate to in life. We cook food we enjoy, read books and listen to music that we feel a connection to, watch shows and movies that we take interest in, as well as engaging in hobbies that we feel a sense of pleasure from. This system of knowing what we enjoy begins as babies and develops more throughout early years and onwards. It is a critical part of life, for things to “spark joy” and motivate us to engage.

Countries like Finland and Italy excel at incorporating the arts into their national curriculums and educational systems among all ages. Exploring global best practice models that reflect the value of the arts reveals how integrating a range of artistic activities into childcare settings can promote holistic development. For example, the Reggio Emilia approach, originating in Italy, focuses on experiential learning through the arts, allowing children to communicate their thoughts and feelings in diverse ways. Such practices not only enrich the educational experience but also encourage children to think critically and innovate.

Supporting children’s artistic and cultural awareness is essential for nurturing their imagination and creativity. Providing regular opportunities for children to engage with the arts allows them to experiment with a diverse array of media and materials. The quality and variety of their artistic experiences play a crucial role in enhancing their understanding, self-expression, vocabulary, and communication skills through the arts. Furthermore, the frequency, repetition, and depth of these experiences are essential for helping children interpret and appreciate the various stimuli they encounter, ultimately enriching their overall artistic development (Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework, 2023).

Incorporating the arts into early learning and education not only enriches the educational experience but also aligns well with the overarching objectives of fostering well-rounded, capable, and confident learners. The learning goals within the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework can be reflected and addressed through the power of the arts as well as other global best-practice approaches to learning. Examining a transdisciplinary approach to early years education that emphasizes the arts, while aligning with the Nova Scotia Early Learning Curriculum Framework and developmental learning outcomes, is highly beneficial for integrating the arts to promote future growth in a child's learning journey. By weaving the arts into various subjects as well as outdoor play and engaging with the environments, children enhance their creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. This approach fosters

collaboration and communication, allowing young learners to express themselves and connect with others.

The arts can be effectively integrated into Nova Scotia's Early Learning Framework by fostering relationships and enriching experiences through creative expression. By incorporating visual arts, music, drama, and movement, educators can create inclusive environments where children explore their identities and cultures, promoting a sense of belonging. The arts encourage collaboration and communication, allowing children to share their perspectives and connect with peers from diverse backgrounds, which aligns with the NS framework's emphasis on fairness, justice, and equity. Additionally, artistic activities support developmental milestones, enhance critical thinking and problem solving and nurture emotional intelligence, ensuring that all children could thrive in a holistic and equitable learning environment.

Integrating new relationship partnerships such as community members and local artists into educational programs fosters a richer, more dynamic learning environment that benefits students, educators, and the broader community. Community members and artists bring real-world perspectives, and diverse skill sets to the environments, enriching the curriculum and making learning more engaging and relevant for students. Exposing students to various cultural practices and viewpoints, fostering appreciation for diversity and promoting inclusivity are also attractive benefits. Involving community members strengthens ties between schools and local organizations, fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging students to participate in community events and initiatives. Artists can serve as mentors, guiding students in their artistic pursuits and helping them develop their talents and interests. Students are often more motivated and engaged when they see the importance and ownership of their work to the community, leading to improved attendance and participation.

Antigonish youth would benefit from incorporating these global insights, as this approach nurtures creativity and supports the comprehensive development of both early years and school-aged children, preparing them for success in an increasingly changing world.

## **Solutions**

The evidence from the research clearly identifies the lack of childcare in Antigonish, as well as insufficient after-school programs to support families in need of care for school-aged children. It also identifies the need for engaging and creative programming. Addressing the childcare crisis in the community requires a complex approach that increases available spaces while addressing the barriers of staff shortages, shift worker demands, and the need for diverse programming, reflecting high quality approaches to learning. Here are some potential solutions:

### **1. Increase Childcare Spaces:**

To meet the growing demand, the community should explore partnerships with the town

and municipalities, local organizations, schools, and community centers to convert underutilized spaces into childcare facilities. This can help quickly expand capacity without the lengthy process of building new centers and will build partnerships and collaborations with the department of education, not-for-profit organizations, community businesses and members of the community. Potential land and green spaces that could be available for donation or purchase, located in attractive and accessible areas suitable for childcare, should also be explored. Additionally, retirement homes should be approached to determine their interest and need in partnerships to provide childcare services.

In addition, a nanny service should be considered for 0–18-month-old infants.

## **2. Addressing Barriers in Regulated Early Years Centres:**

**a)** To reduce the shortage of qualified staff, the community could collaborate with local educational institutions to create training programs tailored to early childhood education (ECE). Offering incentives such as scholarships, student loan forgiveness, or sign-on bonuses can attract new educators to the field. Some of these initiatives are underway in Nova Scotia but perhaps a greater focus on promoting these initiatives would help with enrolment.

Mentorship programs would also benefit new ECEs to ensure their smooth transition to the workforce.

Nova Scotia could benefit from exploring the experiences of other countries that excel in early years education and their emphasis on valuing Early Years Education and the Educators (ECEs). Many ECEs struggle with wages, lack of benefits, and being laid off for the summer months (and some not being paid for winter break and March break). Many countries in the world value and place Early Years Educators in the same category and pay-scale as teachers. Recognizing the undervaluation of Early Years Educators and exploring how the province can address this issue would help tackle the current shortage of ECEs in Nova Scotia. The government has created new incentives that are currently being developed; hopefully a continuation from these incentives will follow.

**b)** Waitlists and the management of waitlists have also been identified throughout the research as a common barrier for parents. Attention to the process of waitlists at regulated early years centres and schools for after-school programs requires further research. Community feedback on desired procedures, along with a deeper discussion with directors about their reasons for the current waitlist processes, are essential. Reflecting on what is working and what isn't, should be further explored.

**c)** Another barrier identified is the lack of representing current cultures within the educational programs and environments. During the Child Care Directors Anonymous Survey-  $\frac{2}{5}$  daycares suggest that less than 10% of families in 2024 represent culturally diverse families,  $\frac{1}{5}$  daycare states more than 20% of families represent culturally

diverse families, 1 daycare doesn't know how many families represent diverse cultures and 1 daycare did not respond. The daycare suggesting 'unknown', perhaps demonstrates a lack of knowledge within the centre on the understanding of knowing the cultural backgrounds represented. With a growing diverse population in the community of Antigonish, this uncertainty is a recognized barrier towards creating an inclusive environment and effectively meeting the needs of all children and families in the centre and community. Early years centers play a crucial role in shaping children's understanding of diversity and inclusion, making it essential for them to educate themselves on the cultural representations of the families within their programs. By actively seeking to understand the cultural backgrounds, values, and traditions of their communities, centers can create an environment that reflects and respects the identities of all children. Solutions may include gaining a better understanding of the families that make-up the community within the learning centre and programs; incorporating culturally relevant materials, artifacts, art, books; adding signs reflecting all languages represented among the families; and including culturally based activities into the program and environment.

Offering free training for staff on cultural competency and supporting the need for building trusting relationships and open communication with families to better understand their needs and perspectives, are all supported by research in establishing positive environments.

Additionally, centers can invite community members and local artists to participate in educational programs, ensuring that the voices and stories of diverse cultures are represented. This proactive approach not only enriches the learning experience for children but also builds stronger connections between families and the educational community, promoting a sense of belonging and mutual respect. An example of these educational experiences might be promoting an international month where all cultures of the centre and programs are celebrated and learned, not just for the students but also for the educators, directors, families of the centre and even for the wider community.

### **3. Supporting Healthcare Professionals:**

Creating childcare solutions specifically for healthcare workers can help recruit and retain these vital professionals in the community. This can include establishing onsite childcare facilities at hospitals, clinics, and retirement homes, and enabling healthcare workers to access childcare easily during their shifts.

**a)** Although the need for childcare in growing communities like Antigonish is essential for everyone, developing an early years' center in partnership with NSHealth and the government to prioritize healthcare professionals would be highly beneficial for our area. The following factors should be addressed in planning such a centre: a central location for accessibility in town (if onsite at a hospital or Senior's Care Home is not available); availability during summer months, in-services, and holidays; as well as opening and closing hours that accommodate shift workers who work from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM. Currently, regulated centers are open on average from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM; perhaps hours from 7:00 AM to 7:30 PM would be more accommodating.

**b)** Infant care and lack of childcare spaces for infants is a major barrier in Antigonish, with only two centers offering a total of 16 spots. This number is insufficient to meet the community's needs. Many healthcare professionals find it stressful to return to work, and some delay their return because they lack childcare for their infants.

A potential solution to attract young healthcare professionals with infants or those planning to have children, as well as to retain them in Antigonish, is for organizations employing healthcare professionals to build partnerships with private nanny services or educational businesses. This collaboration would help families have care for their infants in their homes as well as have supervision for their children during the night and accommodate shift workers hours. This collaboration would also lead to more employment for other members of the community.

#### **4. Diversify Programming to Reflect Best Practices in Childcare and After-School Care:**

The CNA Survey results suggested exploring further the current programming of early years centers, as well as the after-school programs available in the area. To enhance the quality of childcare, programs should reflect best practices in education including incorporating the arts and representing cultural diversity within the environments. By redesigning current programs to include arts-based learning environments and building new programs, including music, dance, visual arts, and multicultural education, children can experience a holistic learning environment. Additionally, establishing after-school programs that offer a wide variety of programs — such as sports, arts, STEM and outdoor exploration—will engage children and support working families. There is significant research documenting the importance of incorporating the arts within educational programs. Creativity can be found within all curriculums and subjects and can link all developmental outcomes. With a great emphasis on learning outcomes within a busy program, art has historically been taken for granted along with nurturing creative attributes such as imagination and play. Children in our community deserve a diverse variety of programs that stem from personal interests and motivations to explore and learn.

“The Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland prioritizes the promotion of children's arts and culture, aligning with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Finnish constitutional rights. It supports high-quality, accessible arts education that fosters creativity for children and youth. Additionally, art and culture clubs, supported by the Ministry, provide supervised opportunities for children to explore their interests, while cultural education plans ensure equitable access to arts education. The Observatory for Arts and Cultural Education further enhances these efforts by collaborating with various educational and cultural organizations to promote lifelong learning and access to the arts for all age groups” (Ministry of Education, Finland). The community of Antigonish would greatly benefit from a similar approach to Finland, incorporating partnerships between community members, organizations and government groups supporting the arts in educational programs, within early years childcare centres, and within after-school programs. Involving the community and gaining input as to what kind of programs they want for their youth regarding programming would be beneficial.

## **5. Keep Abreast of Local Needs**

### **a) Improve Community Engagement**

Involving families and community members in the planning process can help identify specific needs and preferences. Regular surveys, focus groups and community meetings can provide valuable insights into what programs and services would best serve the community, ensuring that the solutions implemented are effective and well-received.

Through implementing collaborative strategies, the community can effectively address the childcare crisis, ensuring that families have access to quality care while supporting the diverse needs of both children and working professionals. The community would benefit from building and developing plans to meet the need, collaborating as a province and community, and brainstorming ideas. How can community centers and public buildings be involved? These community buildings are often empty, particularly during the weekdays in the daytime. What potential land and commercial buildings are available? How can community members, wanting and able to volunteer, be involved with the crisis? Which other organizations and not-for-profits might want to participate in solving this crisis? What have other communities developed and can we learn from these communities? Can a potential temporary centre open while a long-term centre is planned? The power of working together and collaborating can go a long way when it is the community that will benefit.

*"It takes a village to raise a child" -African Proverb*

### **b) Continue to Monitor Data**

Stay updated on changing demographics through monitoring daycare and after- school waitlists and regularly monitoring newly released Stats Canada population data .

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the childcare crisis in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, demands urgent and thorough action to address the multiple elements and challenges it presents to families, healthcare professionals, and the community. This report highlights the critical need for high-quality, accessible childcare services, describing how the current shortages and lengthy waitlists restrict parents from returning to work and intensifies family stress. By utilizing insights from the community survey, directors' survey, and best practices in childcare, we can develop solutions and strategies to enhance service availability and quality to accommodate our growing and diverse population.

Investing in diverse and inclusive educational settings, as well as promoting arts in education, are essential for fostering child development and enriching the lives of families. The proposed solutions aim not only to relieve the immediate pressures faced by parents but also to promote a supportive environment that nurtures children's growth

and well-being. By prioritizing childcare services, Antigonish can build a resilient community that values and invests in its healthcare, children and families, ultimately paving the way for a brighter, more sustainable future. It is exciting what the coming years have in store for the community and addressing this urgent issue will not only improve individual family dynamics, including families within the healthcare sector, but also will strengthen the overall well-being of the community.

Finally, it is important to listen to, learn from, relate to and understand families in the community and the stressors they are experiencing around childcare. Educators, supervisors, and directors should continue to be consulted to identify barriers and collaborate on developing solutions for the Antigonish community moving forward. In the Community Needs Anonymous Survey a parent expressed, *“I hope this survey isn’t just a survey to identify a problem we already know exists. I hope it helps create some real solutions for working women”* (Anonymous Parent/Caregiver).

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: Input from Families in Antigonish**

Selection of anonymous quotes from the Childcare Needs Assessment- July 2024  
*“I feel no one should be forced to accept less than ideal care for their child, but that seems to be where many parents are in the community now. A barrier for our family considering having another child is lack of childcare (uncertainty whether we would have a spot) and can’t afford to be home all the time”* -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver

*“Advocate, advocate, advocate for more childcare. It is extremely stressful and has made my family miss out on work because one of us had to stay home with our baby. Truly unacceptable”* -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver

*“There needs to be action, not just talk. There are people and businesses willing to act, but the rules are so stifling that nothing can happen... and its children and families that are suffering for it”* -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver

*“I would like to see more options for childcare under 18 months of age and see regulated daycares being held to higher standards in terms of their waitlist management (or lack thereof)”* -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver

*“It is encouraging to see this survey being done and having an appropriate forum for feedback. Many people will likely feel relief that their voices are being heard”* - Anonymous Parent/Caregiver

*“Mothers in Canada are still the most negatively impacted in their career after having a child. This is exacerbated when childcare is not available. If we’re truly committed to gender equity, we need to do better to ensure mothers who wish to return to the workforce can do so. Safe and engaging childcare is a critical component”*  
-Anonymous Parent/Caregiver

*“As healthcare providers, we would have to move closer to family and/or closer to places with availability. Childcare is such a priority for healthcare workers to move and stay in an area” -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*“We need more centres with summer childcare that are full hours. Need better options for in-services and school cancellations, particularly for those in healthcare that still need to report to work” -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*“This is a barrier for moms who need to return to work and provide for the family. It's difficult enough to return but to not have access to childcare puts added stress on families. It also provides additional worry about the safety of the baby once the parent does return to work” -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*“For ppl that have had to quit their jobs because of lack of childcare is terrible. Shouldn't be the case” -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*“Open up community centers to help with the strain on childcare”  
-Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*“We have a healthcare crisis and childcare needs to be available to help recruit people to our community and to keep existing ones. There is nothing available for healthcare workers that aren't 9-5” -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*“Our current daycare is AMAZING. We just need more like them. We are a family that was lucky enough to get a spot and I know so many that haven't been so fortunate” -  
Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*“More spaces provided. More Licensed, Regulated childcare centers and Home Care spaces. Lack of childcare spaces leaves women isolated and negatively impacts career advancement. Children lack the opportunity to learn and have healthy socialization when there are so few spots available. It is also unfair to newcomers and those who have few connections in town and most spaces are secured by word of mouth and recommendations. This is not an equitable system. So, few regulated spaces also means that those who need it the most are often not receiving subsidized childcare spaces” -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*“Childcare at the hospital I work at. My child will require childcare January 2025 when my mat leave is finished” -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*“In general, more providers. Both public and private. We are on a 20 waitlist with the likelihood that either me or husband will have to quit our job to look after our son. For two young professionals who waited to have kids after their careers were establish, this is very discouraging” -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*"We have very little opportunity to expose young children to music, art, and drama. There are sports programs, but not enough. You must be lucky to get into the programs!" -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*"More services for school-aged children, after school care and care for in service days and summer" -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*"Childcare in the hospital for healthcare employees" -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*"Registered daycares are required to stay open through the summer months. The lack of after school spots in registered daycares has made it so that we will have to wait to send our Pre-primary aged child to school until next year. Logistically without an after-school spot she can't get to pre-primary in the fall" -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*  
*"More availability. More funding. More credit to existing childcare facilities/providers. More incentives to train as an ECE. With no family in the area and both parents working, childcare is a huge stress. Healthcare worker childcare would be amazing and is so needed" -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*"More availability, especially for registered care. we will need another space for a second child next year at 12 months and unsure if I will be able to return to work (if no spaces become available)" -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*"Access to more childcare in the areas. Possibly some a bit outside of town for the surrounding area as well" -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*"More regulated childcare facilities with the Government discount "10 dollars a day" - Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*"More before and after school (including pre-primary) childcare -Regulated childcare facilities for before 730 am and after 5pm availability -Better pay and benefits for childcare providers" -Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*"More availability! We've been on numerous wait lists for over two years now, and it's terrifying that there is a potential we won't be able to access childcare when we need it. Especially as people who do not have family in the area to help, our only option would be to have one parent quit their job"-Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

*"More childcare options are a must. Safe childcare is crucial for the health and wellbeing of our children. For proper growth and development there needs to be safe and regulated childcare options for families. Invest in early years, they are our future"- Anonymous Parent/Caregiver*

**Appendix 2- Method for assuming population as of 2024 using ([Town and County Births](#)) and [2021 Age at Immigration](#) :**

- Statistics Canada 2021 identifies 150 (under 5) as immigrants to Antigonish County of a population 815 (0-4 in age) or 18.4% of the population.
- Statistics Canada 2021 identifies 30 (under 5) as immigrants to Antigonish Town of a population of 185 or 16.2% of the population.
- Using Town and County birth records from 18/19 - 23/24 to identify the number of births in the area. The above percentages were then applied to each number (less Surrounding Counties) to project a population which includes immigration.
- e.g. 18/19-23/24 Births Antigonish Town \* 2021 immigration rate.  $205 * 16.2\% = 238.21$ .
- These numbers were then compared to the changes between 2016-2021 and 2021-to current projections to determine a percentage increase.

### **Appendix 3- Method for determining projected population using Statistics Canada Population Changes and Town and County Births.**

- Average births between 14/15 - 23/24 determined for both Town and County.
- Using the predicted Population Changes as noted, a 1.8% decrease is applied to the current average birth number. - The new average is multiplied by 5 to project total number of births in area over the next 5-year span.
- An estimated immigration rate of 16.2% (as seen in Appendix 1) is applied to Town births and 18.4% is applied to County rates.
- These numbers are then totaled to predict a population of those aged 0-4 in 2029 and compared to the current population prediction found.
- Ex (13/14 - 23/24 Town births /10 years for average) \* (decline in births) \* (number of predicted new births by 2029) \* (2021 Town Immigration rate) + (same above formula for County) = Total Births
- $(39.7) * (0.982) * (5) * (1.162) + (113.4) * (0.982) * (5) * (1.184) = \text{Total Births}$
- $(226.5) + (658.9) = 886$

The above is compared to the assumed population and then repeated for the 2034 predicted population.

### **Appendix 4- Method for determining projected population using current assumed population and applying changes in population from 2021 Statistics Canada Data.**

- Note that Surrounding Counties births registered to Antigonish account for 2.3% of total births plus assumed immigration rates.
- $((\text{Current assumed Town population}) * (\text{Change in population from 2021}) + (\text{Current assumed County population}) * (\text{Change in population from 2021})) * (\text{Percentage Surrounding counties births}) = 2029 \text{ Projected Population}$
- $((238 * 1.223) + (643 * 0.789)) * (1.023) = 817$
- This information is compared to 2024 predicted populations
- This information is repeated to predict 2034 populations

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