

Framework for Enhancing Student Learning



School District No. 5 (Southeast Kootenay)
Early Learning and Child Care



September 2026

Early Learning and Child Care

School District No. 5 (Southeast Kootenay) continues to strengthen early learning and child care through coordinated, inclusive, and community-connected approaches that support children and families before, during, and after the transition to school. These initiatives reflect the District's commitment to equity, student well-being, family engagement, and strong partnerships with child care operators, early years organizations, community agencies, Indigenous partners, and provincial programs.

Across the District, early learning and child care programming is designed to reduce barriers for families, increase access to meaningful early learning opportunities, and support children's sense of belonging, confidence, and readiness for school. This work is closely aligned with the Framework for Enhancing Student Learning, particularly the goals connected to Human and Social Development, Intellectual Development, equity, inclusion, and successful transitions.

Expanding School-Age Care on School Grounds

The District continues to prioritize the expansion of licensed school-age care on school grounds in response to the needs of children, families, and communities. By supporting before- and after-school care in school-based settings, the District is helping families access reliable care close to where children learn, while also creating more consistent and connected experiences for children throughout the day.

In 2025/26, the District continued to work with child care operators, community organizations, and provincial programs to increase access to licensed school-age care across communities. These partnerships support shared planning, communication, and alignment between school staff and child care providers operating in District buildings and on school grounds.

Where child care is located within or near schools, children benefit from familiar spaces, consistent routines, and stronger connections among families, educators, school staff, and child care providers. This model supports smoother transitions between school and care, strengthens children's sense of safety and belonging, and helps ensure that programs reflect inclusive and responsive practices.

The expansion of school-age care on school grounds directly supports the Framework for Enhancing Student Learning by advancing equity, inclusion, student well-being, and access to supportive learning environments before, during, and after the school day. It also aligns with the District's Strategic Plan by strengthening community partnerships and supporting families across the District.

In 2025/26, the District supported child care in all our school communities, creating or sustaining 245 licensed spaces.

PlayB4K and Play in the K

Play Before Kindergarten (PlayB4K) and Play in Kindergarten (Play in the K) provide early learning opportunities for children and families in Elk Valley schools. These programs support children before kindergarten entry and throughout the kindergarten year by creating welcoming,

play-based experiences that build familiarity with school environments, educators, routines, and peers.

These initiatives align with the Ministry's Strengthening Early Years to Kindergarten Transitions (SEY2KT) approach, which emphasizes collaborative, relationship-based transition practices. Through PlayB4K and Play in the K, schools create intentional opportunities for children, families, educators, and community partners to build relationships before and during the transition to kindergarten.

PlayB4K invites children and families into the school environment prior to kindergarten entry. Through hands-on activities, storytelling, music, movement, exploration, and social interaction, children become familiar with school spaces in a gentle and developmentally appropriate way. Families are also able to connect with school staff, ask questions, learn about kindergarten routines, and gain strategies to support early learning at home.

Play in the K extends this work into kindergarten classrooms by strengthening play-based learning as a foundation for children's growth and development. Through intentional play opportunities, educators support communication, problem-solving, self-regulation, collaboration, literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional development. Educators are also able to observe children's strengths, interests, and needs in order to create responsive learning environments.

Together, PlayB4K and Play in the K help create smoother and more inclusive transitions by strengthening relationships between early learning programs, kindergarten classrooms, families, and community partners. These programs support children's identity, confidence, belonging, and readiness to participate fully in school life.

In 2025/26, PlayB4K and Play in the K were offered in three Elk Valley schools, Fernie, Sparwood, and Elkford.

StrongStart

StrongStart continues to operate in Fernie, Sparwood, and Cranbrook, providing accessible early learning opportunities for children and families across the District. Each StrongStart centre offers a welcoming, play-based environment where children and caregivers learn together and build early literacy, numeracy, communication, and social-emotional skills.

StrongStart programming includes storytelling, music, movement, creative exploration, early learning routines, and meaningful play. These experiences help children develop curiosity, confidence, and positive connections with school environments. The program also provides an important opportunity for parents and caregivers to ask questions, access guidance, connect with educators, and build relationships with other families and community supports.

The presence of StrongStart in multiple communities helps ensure that families can access high-quality early learning experiences close to home. By welcoming children and caregivers into school-based spaces before kindergarten, StrongStart supports positive transitions and strengthens the connection between home, school, and community.

The District's partnership with the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL) continues to enhance professional learning and support for StrongStart and Early Childhood Education

facilitators. This collaboration provides opportunities for shared professional learning, regular meetings, resource development, mentorship, and the exchange of effective practices. CBAL's expertise in literacy development and community engagement supports facilitators in designing programming that reflects the strengths, needs, and identities of families in the region.

In 2025/26, District StrongStart facilitators and CBAL partners were invited to participate alongside teachers in a school-based professional development day focused on Métis cultural learning. The session centred on *Aansaamb aen kiskayhtaamaahk: Learning Together*, a resource that supports Métis-specific teachings, perspectives, and programming. This professional learning helped deepen educator understanding of Métis culture and supported early learning environments where Métis identity, knowledge, and ways of learning are recognized, respected, and celebrated.

Through StrongStart programming, CBAL collaboration, and ongoing professional learning, the District continues to support inclusive, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate early learning experiences that contribute to children's well-being, belonging, and future success.

In 2025/26, StrongStart operated in three communities and served 457 registered children and their caregivers through regular programming, literacy events, and family engagement opportunities.

Ready, Set, Learn

Ready, Set, Learn provides early learning events for families with children from birth to age five who have not yet entered kindergarten. These events help children and caregivers become familiar with school environments, connect with early childhood educators, and learn about resources that support early learning at home, at school, and in the community.

Events include story time, play-based learning activities, music, movement, crafts, and interactive experiences that support children's curiosity, confidence, and early development. Families are also provided with opportunities to ask questions, build relationships with school staff and community partners, and access information that supports a positive transition into school life.

Ready, Set, Learn reflects a collaborative partnership between the Province, the School District, early learning educators, and community partners. Events are offered in communities across the region, including Elkford, Sparwood, Fernie, Jaffray/South Country, and Cranbrook, helping families access early learning opportunities close to home.

In partnership with CBAL, the District is also supporting Early Years Fairs in the Elk Valley in September. These fairs will connect families with local early learning programs, community services, literacy supports, and child development resources. By bringing schools and community partners together in one welcoming setting, the Early Years Fairs will further strengthen family engagement and support children's readiness for school and lifelong learning.

Ready, Set, Learn supports the District's commitment to early learning, family engagement, and successful transitions into kindergarten by helping families build relationships with schools and access supports during the important years before school entry.

In 2025/26, Ready, Set, Learn events were offered in all communities, with approximately 200 children and families participating.

Summary

The District's Early Learning and Child Care initiatives support the Framework for Enhancing Student Learning through a coordinated focus on equity, inclusion, well-being, early development, and successful transitions into school. Across school-age care, StrongStart, Ready, Set, Learn, PlayB4K, Play in the K, and SEY2KT-aligned practices, the District is strengthening access to early learning and child care while helping children and families build positive connections with schools.

Partnerships with child care operators, CBAL, early years organizations, community agencies, families, and provincial programs continue to expand the District's capacity to provide responsive and accessible supports. These partnerships strengthen professional collaboration, family engagement, cultural responsiveness, and continuity between early years programs, child care, and school-based learning.

Moving forward, the District will continue to prioritize equitable access to child care on school grounds, inclusive and culturally responsive early learning programming, and strong family-school-community connections.