



Transformative change for early years and child care in Ontario: From market patchwork to system

Submission in response to “Building a better future:
A discussion paper on transforming early years and
child care in Ontario”

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At first people refuse to believe that a strange new thing can be done, then they begin to hope it can be done, then they see it can be done – then it is done and all the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago.

- Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*

WHO WE ARE

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care is Ontario’s central advocacy group for a universal, affordable, high quality system of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Formed in 1981, the OCBC is a member organization comprising non-profit child care centres, local and provincial groups, and individuals from all across Ontario. We bring together early childhood educators, parents, centre directors, social activists, employers, trade unionists and academics to work on issues of shared concern. Most importantly we are people who care about child care.

FROM MARKET TO SYSTEM

Ontario’s 2016 Throne Speech commitment to create 100,000 new licensed child care spaces for children 0-4 years is a promise that has the potential to transform Ontario’s early years and child care situation. But only if we invest strongly and build wisely will we realize the potential of this promise. Adding spaces alone, even 100,000 new spaces, does not in itself achieve system change. It merely replicates our current patchwork on a larger scale. To truly achieve an early years and child care system that works for Ontario families, we need action to make child care *affordable* for all families and to make programs *sustainable* – not struggling to keep their doors open and pay their educators. We need to truly transform child care in Ontario from a market patchwork to a comprehensive system.

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Writing from a British ECEC context, which closely mirrors what we experience here in Ontario, renowned educational theorist Peter Moss¹ argues that while excellent individual programs exist today they “are largely isolated cases that are often precarious, struggling to survive.” Moss outlines that for such programs to be “enacted on a larger and more sustainable scale, attention must be given to the conditions that are needed for such change. Wishing and hoping for transformation are not enough...thought and resources need to be given to structure and organization.” Moss describes the important roles that early childhood centres, the early childhood workforce, local educative communes or school boards, national, state and local governments must play in enacting an ECEC system.

Moss outlines the joint role of national and provincial governments as one of setting out a policy framework that covers:

five main structural areas that, between them, support a common and seamless approach across the whole system, not one approach for ‘childcare’ and another one for ‘early childhood education’, nor one approach for children under age 3 years and another for children over 3 years:

- *Entitlement: all children and families to have access, as of right, to early childhood centres from birth (bearing in mind that these are multi-purpose services, so that access for very young children, under a year or so, may mainly mean to projects for child and parent or even just to support parents;*
- *Funding and resources: a common system of supply side funding, involving tax-based financing of centres themselves, ensuring either free or low cost attendance;*
- *Curriculum: a broad statement of concepts, values, purposes and goals for early childhood education, including an integrative concept of education-in-its-broadest sense, in which care is viewed as inseparable from learning and democracy and experimentation as fundamental values;*
- *Workforce: defining the structure, roles, education and status of the workforce, as well as goals for a representative composition, and assuring parity with comparable professions such as school teachers or other pedagogues;*
- *Type of provision: setting up main characteristics of the preferred type of provision from the public system of early childhood education, and conditions to be met for receipt of public funding.*

Moss’ approach is useful to inform how we must tackle the transformation of our early years and child care system here in Ontario. A comprehensive approach is clearly needed, rather than more piecemeal repairs to our fraying patchwork. Learning from the mistakes of the recent past – that saw, for example, the introduction of full-day kindergarten destabilize the licensed child care sector – we must recognize that tinkering with one element of the suggested framework while neglecting others will not set us on a stable path to a sustainable system.

No matter how tempting it is to reach for a quick fix that focuses only on one age group or one challenge (say affordability), we must instead commit ourselves to working systematically toward a true transformation that finally frees Ontario to join modern democracies that have embraced public early childhood education and care systems as a necessary, joyous and valued part of our social infrastructure.

We must resist the temptation to reach for a quick fix that focuses only on one age group or one challenge.

Building such a system will take time and perseverance, but making a clear commitment to a long-term goal of system building need not put off immediate improvements that will set us on the right path and build public confidence in the new approach.

A SHARED VISION ACROSS CANADA AND AROUND ONTARIO

Happily, there is broad agreement across Canada and around Ontario – both from academic and sector experts and from social activists, both from parents and from educators – on the best way forward from our current market patchwork to a sustainable system.

Federally, the *Shared Framework for Building an Early Childhood Education and Care System for All*,² developed by the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada in collaboration with the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, Canadian Child Care Federation and Campaign 2000 has been endorsed by dozens of organizations and experts from across Canada. The framework builds on ideas laid out in the *Childcare 2020 Vision Paper*³, which was unanimously adopted by participants at Canada’s 4th National Child Care Policy Conference. Both documents have been appended to this submission.

The ideas described by Moss and reflected in the Vision Paper and Shared Framework provide the solutions to meet parents’ demands for better affordability and to address the groundswell of calls from the early childhood workforce for professional pay and decent work. They provide the elements of a framework to meet quality objectives and build a system that is responsive to the needs of families.

Here in Ontario, through this current consultation process, we have seen a newfound unity and consensus about some of the *critical priorities* to move forward to a more affordable, accessible, responsive and quality system.

CRITICAL PRIORITIES FOR SYSTEM BUILDING

CHALLENGE: AFFORDABILITY. SOLUTION: BASE FUNDING AND AN AFFORDABLE FEE SCALE

There is good evidence to suggest that Ontario’s fee subsidy system is not the best way to address affordability. It’s not only a broken mechanism, but an archaic approach – leaving too many families struggling to pay full fees or languishing on waiting lists.

There is wide agreement that addressing the issue of affordability is best accomplished by base funding programs to break the invisible thread between parent fees and centre budgets. As long as centre budgets and in turn staff wages remain so strongly tied to parent fees, we will always experience a tension between making fees affordable for parents and paying staff decently. A better and more modern approach is base funding programs and setting an affordable, geared to income, sliding fee scale.

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A few examples of this recommendation during the current consultation session:

- Campaign 2000: “An affordable child care system should not be reliant on parent fees. The government must provide base operational funding and any parent fees should be geared to

income. An affordable childcare system must be equitable, and child fees should be based on parents' ability to pay."⁴

- Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives: "Child care should be universally affordable to all — no child should have to miss out on quality child care and early learning opportunities because their parents cannot afford the fees.... Why do three provinces — Quebec, Manitoba, and PEI — have the lowest child care fees in Canada? Their provincial governments have created policies that support affordable child care through base funding, illustrating just how much public policy matters for affordability."⁵
- Childcare Resource and Research Unit: "CRRU favours a geared-to-income approach to parent fees and urges the province to consider building such an approach based on the current Ontario income test."⁶
- CUPE Ontario: "It's time for a total restructuring of funding and fees.... The provincial government should shift to a more sustainable funding model providing long-term operational funding to child care centres with fees on a sliding scale based on income."⁷
- Unifor: Make "child care fees more affordable by providing operational funding to licensed child care centres, introducing a sliding scale for fees and capping maximum parent fees."⁸

CHALLENGE: QUALITY. SOLUTION: ADDRESS STRUCTURAL FACTORS THAT IMPACT QUALITY

The Ministry's discussion paper asks us to consider what role the province should play in ensuring high quality early learning and child care programs. Quality of early learning and child care programs is a topic with a robust research literature, both international and local. The government itself already struck a Best Start Expert Panel on Quality in 2007. Rather than being drawn into a long process of defining and improving quality at the program level, when robust evidence already exists, the government's *first* priority should be to address the big, structural elements that impact quality. This should include two key elements: better support for the early childhood workforce, and flowing new funding and spaces only to public and non-profit programs.

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THE WORKFORCE

Again, there is widespread agreement on the importance of developing a workforce strategy to better support Registered Early Childhood Educators and other staff working in early years and child care programs.

- Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO): "It is the AECEO's position that a well-supported EC workforce is the structural foundation upon which the four key pillars can be strengthened."⁹
- Campaign 2000: "Staff and governance of centres are the foundation of quality. Sustaining employment that values the skills and expertise of early childhood educators and staff is essential to quality, contributing to staff retention, consistency in care and to the stability of the system to best serve parents and children."

- CUPE Ontario: “Fundamentally, quality is linked to staffing; when wages and working conditions are poor, it is difficult to recruit and retain child care workers. Quality programming cannot occur without well-remunerated staff with good working conditions that allow for consistent education and care.”
- Unifor: “A system that enables workers to engage in education, continuous training and professional learning is important in this process. Safe and positive working conditions and appropriate compensation for our child care workforce is also key to maintaining quality programs and retaining our skilled workforce. Workers in the field should be valued and compensated fairly for their work.”

The community is also clear that addressing workforce issues cannot be done in isolation from other elements of system building. As the AECEO writes, “Based on available research the AECEO recommends that the EC workforce is best supported through a well-funded system of public and non-profit early years and child care programs.”

LIMITING FOR-PROFIT CHILD CARE

Comparative research studies and international policy case studies both point to the need to limit the growth of for-profit child care programs. This is not only an issue of quality, but one of ethics, stability, and responsiveness. The OCBCC has long held the position that there should be a moratorium on licensing new for-profit child care programs – that is, all expansion of child care in Ontario should happen in public and non-profit programs.

This has never been a more pressing issue than as we stand at the outset of a major expansion of spaces with new funding flowing to the sector. As the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives’ submission warns: “With the allure of substantial new public funds and without coherent public policy that breaks with our historical reliance on for-profit child care, rapid expansion in for-profit child care could very well compromise a progressive modern vision for quality, accessible child care in Ontario.”

Other organizations make similar recommendations on the need to expand only in the non-profit and public sectors.

- Childcare Resource and Research Unit: [Ontario must develop] “a plan for moving away from reliance on for-profit child care operations, which research shows is likely to be poorer quality as a sector. CRRU recommends that none of the new 100,000 spaces committed be in profit-making operations.”
- Canadian Union of Public Employees: “The research is clear: public and non-profit child care consistently receives higher quality ratings than for-profit centres. In fact, municipal child care was determined to have the best quality across all age groups.¹⁰ Given the increased quality, the provincial government should ensure our child care system is built on public and non-profit child care.”
- Unifor: “A focus on public and non-profit providers results in a higher quality of care compared to commercial care. The most responsible use of public dollars is to expand child care in the public and nonprofit sectors.”

- Campaign 2000: “The province’s role should include establishing standards of quality of care and monitoring; providing improved wages, training and education to early child care educators; assessing quality based on clear goals, supporting child care provision through public/non-profit child care services; engaging in planning and research; and providing adequate and sustainable financial support.”

URGENT INVESTMENTS AND WAYSTATIONS ON THE ROAD TO AN NEW ECEC SYSTEM

“Even though we cannot achieve transformative change immediately or even immanently, it does not mean there is no point in starting, no value in moving towards waystations that demonstrate viability, that increase public confidence that another future is possible.” – Peter Moss, Transformative Change and Real Utopias in Early Childhood Education.

Fully transforming early learning and care in Ontario will take time, and the government’s five year goal must be fleshed out with a detailed implementation timeline to ensure that Ontario meets its commitments. Even given a staged roll-out, there are several reasons why immediate investment in child care is warranted and that a “front-loading” of funding in the first two years of implementation makes sense.

First, the sector is emerging from a period of stabilization following the implementation of full-day kindergarten and requires immediate funds to move from stabilization to growth. Second, the needs of families for swift and significant expansion cannot be overstated. While there are currently spaces for approximately 23% of 0-4 year olds, for younger children the rate is significantly lower with spaces for only 3% of infants in some areas. Young families are in desperate need of real solutions to the child care crisis in Ontario, and immediate action will help parents to see that a better future is possible.

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We thus recommend the following immediate actions to kick start the process of system transformation:

- Commit at least \$500 million in capital funding for Year 1 of the child care expansion to begin to make a real difference in availability of spaces;
- Provide \$300 million in new operating funding to keep pace with expansion of spaces, to support child care services directly and kick start a process of system transformation. The province should contribute an additional \$75 million to address immediate crises faced by existing programs;
- The province should commit to moving from the current broken fee subsidy system to an affordable sliding fee scale with capped maximum fees, and begin work immediately to design an affordable fee model that works for all Ontario families;
- Commit to a provincially established workforce strategy to ensure all staff have professional pay and decent work;
- All funding should be indexed to inflation;
- Commit funding and resources to support system infrastructure including data and research.

RESPONSES TO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

ACCESS

What does access to child care and early years programs mean to you?

Access to child care would mean:

- there are enough spaces for all who want them;
- parents could afford licensed child care spaces with quality programs;
- spaces are available where you need them (convenient, close to public transit, lower-income communities, rural communities) and when you need them (shift and precarious work during evenings, nights and weekends);
- providing supports for the full inclusion of children with special needs in child care centres and enabling child care that respects the racial, cultural and ethnic diversity of our communities;
- having a system that's easy to navigate and user-friendly.

In your experience, what are the strengths of the current system and what are the biggest barriers to parents accessing licensed child care and early years programs in your community?

One strength of our current system is the dedicated workforce who provide quality services.

There are many serious barriers, which make it difficult to access licensed child care including the long waitlists for licensed child care spaces, the costs that are unaffordable to most parents, the lack of options for shift workers and in rural communities, the lack of available spaces for children with special needs and a child care system that is difficult for parents to navigate.

In your experience, what can be done by governments, communities, employers and providers to increase access to licensed child care and early years programs?

- The provincial government should fund the capital costs to create additional child care spaces;
- The provincial government should make child care fees more affordable by providing base operational funding to licensed child care centres, introducing a sliding scale for fees and capping maximum parent fees.;
- Municipal child care system managers would continue their role in consulting with communities to prioritize new spaces being developed in under-served communities;
- A segment of the new spaces created should accommodate parents who work shift work based on community need.

RESPONSIVENESS

Do parents have the early years and child care options they need?

- No. With licensed spaces for less than a quarter of children, currently too many families do not have the option of quality licensed child care.
- Families who work non-standard hours, and those living in rural areas often have even fewer options.
- Indigenous families often do not have the option of culturally safe and appropriate programs.

What are the strengths of the current system and options available?

- There are many examples of great early learning and child care programs around the province. We need to emulate what these sites of excellence do well when we expand spaces.

What can be done to provide your family with more choice and flexibility?

- The government should invest capital and operating funds in developing more public and non-profit child care centres so that there are adequate spaces for those that need them.
- Programs to meet the needs of families working non-standard hours or child care options that work for rural areas are best achieved within a comprehensive child care system because these programs can be very expensive to operate on their own. An innovative flexible models program (like Ontario had in the early 1990s) could build and evaluate programs to meet the needs of rural areas and non-standard hours child care needs.

AFFORDABILITY

What does an affordable child care system look like to you?

- All parents can afford child care fees; costs do not eat up a significant portion of parents' incomes.
- Parent fees are on a sliding scale and geared to parents' income.
- The government funds operating costs of licensed child care centres.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the subsidy model in Ontario?

- Our current child care funding and subsidy model in Ontario is broken. A study for the City of Toronto found that licensed child care was unaffordable for 75% of families.
- Even if a family in Ontario qualifies for subsidized child care, they may be placed on a long waitlist and have to pay full fees for a period of time.
- The provincial government should shift to a more sustainable funding model to provide long-term operational funding to child care centres with fees on a sliding scale based on income.

What are the most important things governments, communities, providers and employers should do to make early years programs in Ontario more affordable?

- Affordability will continue to remain an issue until we move from a child care market to a child care system. The government has an opportunity with the creation of 100,000 spaces to begin creating a system with well-compensated and trained staff, affordable parent fees and enriching learning environments.
- Research shows that child care costs for middle class families are lowest where the provinces have regulated fees and made up the difference through provincial core funding to services. We need the government to prioritize affordable child care to help close the gender wage gap, to support working families and to reduce poverty rates.

QUALITY

What does a high quality early years or child care program look like?

- At the minimum, quality settings provide inviting spaces for children to play and learn together, supported by a consistent staff of well-trained educators.
- Quality should also encompass other important values like inclusion for children with disabilities, cultural safety, and equitable access for all families.

What role should the province play in ensuring high quality early learning and child care programs?

- The Province should focus on *structural* factors that can influence quality – such as better wages and training for staff, and public and non-profit provision.
 - Research shows that the training and consistency of staff have an impact on program quality – low-turnover can be achieved through decent pay and working conditions.
 - Studies show that there is a quality advantage for public/non-profit child care compared to commercial care. The most responsible use of public dollars is to expand child care in the public and non-profit sectors.

How should we measure quality in our early years and child care programs?

- The Province should engage with child care experts and researchers to develop a robust data and research agenda to monitor quality as the system develops.

¹ Moss, P. (2014). *Transformative change and real utopias in early childhood education: A story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality*. London: Routledge.

² Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (2016). *Shared Framework for Building an Early Childhood Education and Care System for All*. Ottawa: Author. Available online at: ccaacacpsge.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/sharedframework_jan2016.pdf

³ Childcare 2020 conference (2014). *Child Care in Canada by 2020: A vision and a way forward*. A discussion paper for Canada's 4th national policy framework. Available online at: ccaacacpsge.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/visionchildcare2020nov3eng.pdf

⁴ Campaign 2000. (2017). *Submission to the Early Years and Child Care Strategy*. Toronto: Author.

⁵ Hennessy, T. (2017). *Better Child Care for Ontario: Response to the Ontario Ministry of Education's consultations on child care and early years strategy*. Toronto: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Ontario Office.

⁶ Childcare Resource and Research Unit. (2017). *Response to the Ontario Ministry of Education's consultation on child care and early years strategy*. Toronto: Author.

⁷ Submission by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) to the Ministry of Education Consultation on Child Care and Early Years Strategy.

⁸ Unifor. (2017). *Early Years and Child Care: Good for Equality, Good for the Economy*. Unifor's submission Ontario Consultation on Early Years and Child Care Strategy. Toronto: Author.

⁹ Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario. (2017). *Submission to the Ministry of Education Consultation on Early Years and Child Care*. Toronto: Author.

¹⁰ Childcare Resource and Research Unit (2011). *What research says about quality in for-profit, non-profit and public child care*. CRRU Briefing Note. Toronto: Author.