



Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care

**A Transformational Vision of Early Learning and Care
in Ontario**

October 28, 2008

Purpose of this Paper

The purpose of this paper is to put forward recommendations to the Early Learning Advisor regarding the Ontario government's plan to provide full-day learning (FDL) for four- and five-year-olds within the context of building a full system of early learning and care.

Guiding Principles

Full Day Learning for Four- and Five-Year-Olds

1. ***Child-centred programming and curriculum:*** The program must be child-focused. Learning theories and developmentally appropriate play-based learning practices should guide the design and implementation of the early learning programs and support growth in all of the developmental domains, recognizing that social, emotional and creative development need to be addressed just as much as cognitive, language or physical development.
2. ***Seamless day/ integrated services:*** Many children now have to adjust to major environmental and pedagogical changes in the course of their day and deal with duplication, fragmentation, or inconsistencies in their learning and care. To address these important concerns, the "full day learning program" must be developed with a view to creating a "seamless" day for children. It is also critical the program be founded on an integrated model which makes available professional services and supports for children and their families so that the developmental and care needs of children are effectively met.
3. ***Ensure high quality service:*** High quality early learning and care programs promote healthy child development. Educators and researchers have concluded that the quality of these services is positively impacted by:
 - **Learning environment:** A quality setting is one that is child-centered, providing care integrated with developmentally appropriate activities for young children. The setting has a richness of resources including educational tools and high nutritional standards.
 - **Adult-to-child ratios:** The number of adults as compared to the number of children is crucial given that high adult-to-child ratios and capping class sizes enhances the capacity of staff to more sensitively interact with the children and parents.
 - **Qualifications, remuneration and morale of staff and providers:** Highly qualified, well-paid and well-supported staff who experience high job satisfaction with low turnover rates are better able to respond to all children, plan and support developmentally appropriate programming, and

provide learning and care that respects diversity and values all children and families.

- **Public, non-profit delivery:** The research in Canada and internationally is clear that non-profit early learning programs consistently serve children and families better and are of higher quality. Any new investment in the sector should be for expansion in the public and non-profit sector only.
- **Equity and inclusion:** The principles of equity and inclusion incorporate basic values that celebrate diversity. Programs must promote and support the right of and opportunity for each child to be a full and active participant and learner.

4. Meet the needs of families: Full day early learning and care must be delivered in a manner that recognizes and is supportive of different families and their needs, while providing a curriculum that addresses all of the developmental domains. It must welcome and support parent involvement and participation in the ongoing learning, development and care of their young children.

5. Meet the needs of those working in early learning and care: The program must be funded at a level that ensures good working conditions and remuneration for all staff. There must also be appropriate professional development opportunities, incentives to upgrade qualifications and opportunities to pursue relevant career paths.

Background

Political Context

In November 2007 Ontario's Premier, Dalton McGuinty, appointed Dr. Charles Pascal as Special Advisor to recommend the best way to implement a full-day early learning program for four- and five-year-olds. The appointment became effective February 1, 2008 with a report due to the Premier in March 2009. Roll-out of the full-day program is to begin in September 2010.

The "Terms of Reference" for the Special Advisor state that full-day learning for four- and five-year-olds must be looked at in the broader context. It is critical that this program be a part of a plan to build and fund an early learning and care system for all children aged 0 to 12 years. This is a tremendous opportunity to build a truly seamless day for all young children.

OCBCC Context

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care has been advocating for a universal, not-for-profit, quality early learning and care system that is accessible and affordable for all parents since 1981. To that end the discussion items and recommendations contained in this paper are reflective of this organizational position.

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The OCBC working group discussions were consistently framed from a “systems building” perspective. The central question the group focused on was, “How will the delivery of full-day learning for four- and five-year-olds positively contribute to the development of a full system of early learning and care for children, newborn to 12 years of age?”

Ontario needs a system of early learning and care that meets the developmental and social needs of children and the economic needs of their parents. The development of a universal service for four- and five-year-olds must be done within the framework of developing a whole system.

Ontario’s current provision of early learning and care is fragmented, inaccessible and unaffordable. Outside of the provision of junior and senior kindergarten, which is funded through the public education system, the cost of early learning and care is covered through parent fees. Subsidies are available based on income, but they are not universal. There is not enough public investment to meet the needs of parents with young children.

There is strong consensus that moving away from the current funding mechanism and extending the principles of “public delivery” to early learning and care would be a tremendous system-building step.

The OCBC discussion reflects the experience of the child care sector. Many past political promises have resulted in ill-defined short-term programs that have only added to service fragmentation. Therefore, a primary concern that emerged again and again was that if FDL is implemented without a system-building approach, it will lead to more fragmentation and instability in an already fragile network of services. The success of full-day learning for four- and five-year-olds is predicated on implementing it within a systems framework that builds on existing assets and promising practices.

There is a need to ensure that this opportunity for expansion does not erode existing service delivery for families, nor provide opportunity for profit provision to expand in the sector.

Discussion Process

The working group was made up of council members of the OCBC. The group was constructed so that the key constituents as well as the regions of the province of Ontario were represented.

The group met via teleconference every two weeks from August 2008 - October 2008. Every meeting focused on a significant topic related to the early learning initiative. These topics were: Human Resources; Curriculum; Funding; Parent Choice and Involvement; Governance and System Building.

We relied on decades of accumulated knowledge, research and practice. We focused on a few key resources for guiding language and points of discussion: Reports from the Best Start Expert Panels, *Investing in Quality – Policies, Practitioners, Programs and Parents* (2007); and *Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework for Ontario ELC Settings* (2006); the OECD publication, *Starting Strong II* (2006); and a paper produced by Martha

Friendly at the Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU), *Building a Strong and Equal Partnership between Childcare and Early Childhood Education in Canada, (June 2008).*

Our discussions were focused on the main facets of system building for early learning and care in Ontario. These included; child-centred learning and care approaches, including curriculum and parent involvement; human resources; governance; funding; and implementation.

CURRICULUM

Learning theories and **developmentally appropriate play-based learning practices** should guide the design and implementation of the early learning programs and support growth **in all of the developmental domains**, recognizing that social, emotional and creative development need to be addressed just as much as cognitive, language, or physical development.

Where We Want To Be

The curriculum for FDL must be based on the holistic social and cognitive development of the child and guided by the principle of the seamless day. The essence of this principle is that the adults in the care and learning environments make the transitions - not the child. The learning throughout the day is connected for the child in some meaningful way, and it is the responsibility of the workforce to coordinate and communicate through the transitions of the day to ensure that they are working for the benefit of the child.

This notion of seamlessness and child-focused learning happens throughout the day, be it an extended day, a full-day or a half-day year round. A seamless approach needs to be reflected in all early learning and care situations – for children of all ages. The responsible ministry will have an important role to play to ensure that curriculum guidelines are met and that appropriate pedagogical approaches are in place.

How to Get There

Develop a common tool that blends the Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT) and the Ministry of Education kindergarten program guidelines.

Develop quality assurance measures that appropriately evaluate the program's curriculum and efficacy.

Provide adequate ongoing professional training and development for the entire ELCC workforce.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Full-day early learning and care must be delivered in a manner that recognizes, and is supportive of, different families and their needs, while providing a curriculum that addresses all of the developmental domains. It must welcome and support parent

involvement and participation in the ongoing learning, development, and care of their young children.

Where We Want To Be

Develop and support staffing models that enable effective, ongoing communication and engagement with parents.

Early learning and care programs support young children's learning. They also support parents in their efforts to work and go to school, and in their parenting.

For parents it is very important to have regular contact each day with those most responsible for their child's early learning and care.

When parents feel supported by knowledgeable professionals who share a commitment to their child's development, they are able to be full partners in their child's early learning and care.

How to Get There

All programs to maintain ratios of qualified staff throughout the day to support effective communication with and support for parents.

HUMAN RESOURCES

There is strong consensus that extending the principles of “public delivery” of the education system into early learning and care would be a tremendous step forward. As we explore the exciting possibility of the integration of the existing public education system with early learning and care services, one of the most complex issues to emerge is that of human resources.

There are a number of human resources issues that must be considered to ensure that the implementation of FDL in Ontario does not erode or negatively impact the fragile early learning and care service network in Ontario. There is a great deal of concern about potential job loss within the early learning and care sector; there is a need for all professions to be understood and valued within this new approach. These critical human resources issues must be addressed to sustain existing early learning programs and to support province-wide expansion and integration with schools and other community services.

Any public investment in early learning and care must be an investment in quality. This means that no matter how the FDL for four- and five-year-olds is structured, it must be built on a foundation of good wages, benefits and working conditions for the current child care and early learning workforce. It must value the work of early learning and care practitioners, help practitioners obtain the education they need to do their jobs, and attract and retain people in the early learning and care field from the perspective of a full system of early learning and care.

Where We Want To Be: A valued workforce

We want ***early learning and care to be a career of choice*** for those entering and currently in the early learning and care workforce. This committed, knowledgeable, qualified workforce must receive compensation commensurate with its education and experience, and be recognized for its valuable contribution to the field.

Without significant ***improvements to wages*** for the ECE workforce we will continue to see declining numbers of experienced workers. This is one of the biggest threats to any promise of expanded service in Ontario.

Attention must be paid to ***recruitment and retention*** of an early learning and care workforce. In order to attract, recruit and retain a knowledgeable, skilled, committed and engaged early childhood workforce, early learning and care programs must be able to:

- provide opportunities for education and advancement
- provide appropriate wages and working conditions
- create exciting, welcoming, learning workplaces

We want the early learning and care workforce to be covered by ***protective legislation and regulations***, including laws and standards affecting health and safety, violence in the workplace, and workplace safety.

We want a **team approach** in the workplace with well-defined roles and responsibilities that support the development of and a quality experience for children.

We want all professionals within the sector to have the **right to full-time employment** and not to have part-time employment imposed upon them by any new structure.

How to Get There

Immediately increase base funding for early learning and care services to enable programs to implement substantial wage and benefit increases over the next four years.

Improve the career ladder available and ensure that practitioners have the opportunity to move and develop, without leaving the field.

Communicate clearly, when recruiting and training, the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to promote children's development and early learning.

Provide predictable and sustainable funding that allows for ongoing improvements in wages, benefits and working conditions, and maintains legislated pay equity.

Continue to improve professional development opportunities for the ECE workforce including directors and supervisors.

Where We Want to Be: Enhanced skills and credentials

All early learning and care practitioners and program supervisors (leaders) will have easy access to the education they need to be lifelong learners, provide high quality programs, and progress in their careers.

Across the full system we want directors and supervisors to be supported in their efforts to enhance their skills and upgrade their credentials. This will enable them to build teams, mentor staff, improve morale and improve the quality of children's early learning experiences. We need to engender leadership practices that contribute to an increased sense of teamwork, better morale, more effective support for staff developing inclusive programs for children with special needs, and higher quality programs.

How to Get There

Provide support and incentives for directors and supervisors, such as bursaries and time off to attend programs, to encourage them to upgrade their qualifications.

Provide bursaries, forgivable loans, development grants, replacement staff and other incentive programs to help practitioners upgrade their qualifications.

Where We Want To Be: Improved wages and benefits

The funding required for wage improvement should be provided as part of base program funding – and not be based on multiple complex formulas or enhancement grants that create additional reporting requirements for municipalities and programs.

How to Get There

Develop provincial guidelines for wages, benefits, and working conditions for early learning and care practitioners.

Establish minimum salary scales and benefits for all early learning and care practitioners and support staff that reflect education and responsibilities.

Establish expectations for working conditions that support quality.

FUNDING

Over the years we have come to recognize the incredible benefits of a publicly funded education system that gives universal entitlement to all Ontario children Grades 1 - 12. So too do we see a need and expect to move in this direction for early learning and care. We see full-day learning for four- and five-year-olds as a logical step in this positive direction. It must be viewed as an essential piece of a system, but not the entire system.

We want to extend the notion of public entitlement to all early learning and care. We want to ensure that the four- and five-year-olds' learning day is part of a publicly funded system and in no way affects the current public nature of the education system. We do not want to see for-profit delivery of early learning and care services.

Early learning and care is currently funded predominately through parent fees. There is a difference in the cost to the service provider for younger children and four- and five-year-olds. The revenue generated from programs for four- and five-year-olds offsets the higher costs associated with programs for younger children. Some costing estimates suggest that removing four- and five-year-olds from child care centres will result in a 25% parent fee increase for their younger children. In many cases this will seriously affect the viability and quality of existing services and may in fact lead to closures.

Where We Want To Be

A direct program funding model that moves away from a subsidy system based on parent fees, to direct funding to service providers for all children under 12 years of age.

How to Get There

Building on the fully funded education system model, bring base, multi-year funding to all early learning and care services phasing into a fully funded system for all children under 12 years of age.

Parent Fees

The cost of licensed child care in Ontario is a huge financial burden for families.

Parent fees make up the lion's share of funding for early learning and care services in the province of Ontario. Parents pay about 80% of the cost, and government investment covers the other 20%. We need to strike a balance, as many other international jurisdictions have done, and remove the burden of funding from parents. The current market-driven approach detracts from the development of quality child care services by allowing profit provision. Shifting to a supply side funding model - where the service provider is funded directly - provides an important step in protecting public investment from for-profit expansion into already existing public programs.

Where We Want To Be

We want to see parent fees at no more than 20% of the cost of early learning a care for children.

How to Get There

Parent fees will be a transition measure until services are available for all children and families free of charge.

Allocate federal/provincial funding to strengthen and expand the current system for children aged 0-3 to catch up to increased demand.

Parent fees should be no more than 20% of the full cost of child care. To be truly affordable the fees should be equivalent to no more than one hour of minimum wage, with the government funding the balance of the cost as is done in other jurisdictions in Canada (Quebec and Manitoba) and around the world.

EVALUATION AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Quality service, system development and public endorsement rely on effective, well communicated evaluation and public reporting on federal and provincial investments.

Where We Want To Be

We want a universal quality system of early learning and care that meets the needs of all children and their families in Ontario. This system must be focused on transparent, accountable public funding to provide an affordable space for every child in Ontario, adequately compensate staff and continuously improve program quality.

Evaluation of the program's implementation must be adequately funded and not downloaded on the existing staff.

How to Get There

Improve quality of early learning and care services by:
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- *Bringing provincial regulations, curriculum guidelines and standards of practice into line with the best available knowledge about quality in early learning and care.*
- *Improving professional qualifications and wages to reflect the value of the service provided.*
- *Maintaining or improving current staff-to-child ratios.*

Put in place a plan to monitor progress on the development of the early learning and care system by:

- *Regularly collecting data using specified criteria to evaluate progress in reaching the targets and timelines of implementing the early learning and care system.*
- *Reporting annually to ensure ear-marked funds are spent as intended, and make the annual report available to the public.*
- *Using evidence-based research to inform the development and accountability of the system.*

Establish a mechanism for consultation with the research community and stakeholder constituency that gives these groups an obligatory and legal status in development, planning, and evaluation of the early learning and care system.

Set targets and timetables to phase in new, integrated services for ages 0-12 over a period of 10 years. Expand services for children 0-3, and before- and after-school care. Achieve access for all four- and five-year olds to the new full-day early learning program, building on all existing resources.

GOVERNANCE

Creating an effective governance model for early learning and care is the backbone of an effective policy framework. Early learning and care in Ontario would benefit from a comprehensive policy framework that would include funding, quality standards, and legislation and accountability. Without this we will continue to patch together a series of disparate programs that do not function as one coherent service.

Where We Want To Be

Establish framework legislation to develop a comprehensive system of high quality early learning and care services within the public sector.

We want enforcement of regulations governing early learning and care as set out in the *Day Nurseries Act* regardless of where the program is located. This must include appropriate maximum group sizes and staff-to-child ratios.

We want regulatory measures taken to ensure the transportation needs of young children are properly and appropriately addressed when full-day learning for four- and five-year-olds is introduced.

How to Get There

Adopt legislation that improves the current standards under the Day Nurseries Act. This legislation must both protect the public delivery of early learning and care and enshrine the right to quality service for all children in Ontario.

Early learning and care services for all children aged 0 to 12 should be governed by a new division of Early Learning and Care within the Ministry of Education.

IMPLEMENTATION

Ontario needs a phased-in approach with goals that ensure the successful implementation of this new opportunity for children and families. Targeted timelines need to be established before early learning and care in Ontario slips further into crisis.

We see this as an opportunity for transformational change that will be a legacy for the McGuinty government.

Appendix

OCBCC Full-Day Learning Working Group

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