



A Response to the Ministry of Education

Modernizing Child Care in Ontario Discussion Paper

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Dear Minister Broten,

The Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) commends the Ministry of Education for initiating a Modernizing Child Care Discussion Paper and for seeking feedback and advice from Ontario's early learning and child care community. The discussion paper offers a timely vision for early learning and care that will stabilize and transform the system to enable higher-quality consistent services over the next three years. The AECEO is the professional association for early childhood educators in Ontario. It is our mission to act on behalf of Ontario's early childhood educators (ECEs). The AECEO's response to the Modernizing Child Care Discussion Paper will therefore focus on the following issues of particular concern to early childhood educators as professionals: wages and working conditions, child care legislative and regulatory frameworks, professional development and early childhood learning environments.

Early Childhood Educator Wages and Working Conditions

The AECEO is highly concerned that the ministry's discussion paper does not ask substantial questions about chronic ECE workforce issues that significantly affect workforce capacity and program quality. It is particularly important for the ministry to take action on ECE workforce issues to ensure that ECEs in child care programs do not fall behind DECEs in full day kindergarten programs. The AECEO urges the ministry to immediately communicate to the early childhood education community their intention to address long-standing workforce issues. This communication will go a long way to reassuring Ontario's ECE workforce that the Ministry of Education is listening to their concerns about poor wages and working conditions.

The government provides funding to CMSMs/DSSABs and First Nations through wage subsidies to enhance salaries and benefits to staff. However, it is clear that this approach cannot be sustained in a modernized child care system. A provincially established salary grid along with base funding for child care programs must be established to raise the salaries of early childhood educators. Manitoba and Prince Edward Island have ECE salary grids that could guide the ministry in the development of an Ontario salary grid. Low ECE salaries have resulted in poor morale, job dissatisfaction and high staff turnover. Early childhood educators are leaving the child care field and replacements cannot be recruited which has had an on-going negative impact on staff consistency and stability and program quality.

Multiple studies (i.e. Whitebook, Sakai & Howes, 1997; Beach & Costigliola, 2005) over the last two decades have demonstrated that there is a strong link between early childhood educator wages, staff stability and the quality of services. While the Modernizing Child Care Discussion Paper proposes several valuable mechanisms to promote consistencies in quality, research shows that the surest way to improve program quality is to recognize early childhood educators as professionals and ensure that they are adequately compensated. The 2007 report of the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services Expert Panel on Quality and Human Resources identified the following four critical “building blocks” for creating a province-wide system of quality child care service:

1. Effective policies, sustained funding and appropriate infrastructure
2. Properly paid, registered and committed educators
3. Evidence-informed age appropriate programs and practices
4. Parents who are partners in their children’s early learning (p.8)

The AECEO maintains that without the “the block” of well-compensated early childhood educators, a quality early childhood system cannot be built up and stabilized in Ontario. Indeed, the AECEO cannot imagine a modernized child care system if the wages of early childhood educators continue to be tied to families’ ability to pay child care fees. Nor can the AECEO imagine increasing ECEs’ public accountability in a modernized system without adequate professional recognition through improved compensation and benefits. Now that child care is part of the Ministry of Education, the focus must be on the equal recognition of Ontario’s ECEs and teachers who are central to positive child outcomes in a modernized early learning and child care system. A coordinated human resources plan with well-articulated short, mid and long term goals will ensure that Ontario has a knowledgeable and appropriately compensated ECE workforce necessary to support the development of quality programs. The implementation of a human resources plan as part of a modernized child care system will attract and retain trained and committed professionals and significantly improve program quality.

Child Care Legislative and Regulatory Frameworks

The AECEO supports the government’s intention to modernize child care legislative and regulatory frameworks. Indeed, early childhood educators have been working with legislation (Day Nurseries Act), established in 1949, and last reviewed in 1983. The revision process must include community engagement and research based decision making. An updated DNA should provide substantive direction on quality program elements including age grouping, adult-child ratios, staff qualifications, professional development requirements, and indoor and outdoor space allocations. A new DNA must reflect a policy of “quality early childhood learning and care” supported by adequate public funding as opposed to a policy of minimum standards operating within a market approach to child care services. Ontario’s early childhood educators want to provide rich learning environments for young children.

Early Learning for Every Child Today can serve as a common curriculum framework for early childhood educators to achieve this goal. However, the ministry must direct sufficient funding into professional development resources so that early childhood educators in every Ontario child care program are working with the principles set out in ELECT.

Professional Development for ECEs

The AECEO maintains that a key strategy for supporting sector capacity to deliver high quality programs is ongoing professional development. AECEO supports the government's objective "to develop tools, resources and training opportunities to support child care operators and caregivers as they implement...quality initiatives". Currently, Ontario's ECEs do not have consistent opportunities to engage in professional development, expand their educational qualifications or enhance their leadership capacity. Early childhood educators as professionals seek a range of in-service opportunities. But, as research has demonstrated, these opportunities cannot be one-time only events; rather ECEs need on-going professional learning and mentoring opportunities and professional networks provided by the very community that has promoted professionalism and growth all these years. To fully engage the ECE workforce and ensure equity in access to learning the ministry must utilize the expertise of existing organizations such as the AECEO, colleges and universities.

Learning Environments for Young Children

The Modernizing Child Care Discussion Paper recognizes that "many child care operators want to adapt their programs for younger children (as a result of FDK) but have limited financial capacity to undertake the renovations necessary to meet the licensing requirements for younger age groups". The discussion paper has proposed that child care operators in schools work with FDK by redesigning school space to serve younger age groups. And the paper asks: "Where school-based space does not meet community needs what additional capital tools could support community based child care operators"? The AECEO supports the ministry's aim to provide child care programs with capital tools for reconfiguring space. However, the ministry must ensure that the outcomes of capital resources significantly maintain or improve the quality of learning environments for young children. The Quality by Design project (Friendly, Doherty & Beach, 2006) found that "in addition to...basic health and safety considerations, today there is considerable...knowledge concerning design and architecture of children's environments with emphasis on creativity, physical activity, social and cognitive development, aesthetic considerations, and how the physical environment can support rather than hinder implementation of excellent early childhood programs and ensure their visibility as a valued community institution". Without adequate funding and spaces that accommodate age and group sizes, the number of poor learning environments that already exist for Ontario's youngest children will simply increase. The physical design of reconfigured space

needs to be informed by the best evidence so that children, early childhood educators and families can thrive in high quality learning environments. Every child care facility in Ontario must convey that early childhood education is highly valued, and early childhood educators are respected and valued professionals.

Over the last 60 plus years, AECEO's members have worked with the provincial government, municipalities, service managers, and families to build a child care system in Ontario. These professionals have adapted and innovated to meet the growing child care needs of families and children and to respond to new research and ideas in early childhood education. Early childhood educators in Ontario remain today a committed workforce who want a modernized child care system and who want to work with the Ministry of Education on its implementation. Indeed, modernization of child care in Ontario will be driven on the ground by dedicated early childhood educators. Therefore, as an essential part of modernization, the AECEO urges the Ministry of Education to initiate a human resources plan so that Ontario's early childhood educators will finally achieve the professional recognition and status they so richly deserve.