

## Modernizing Child Care - *Questions to answer: more to ask*

Kerry McCuaig

*Atkinson Foundation Fellow in Early Childhood Policy*

July 2012

[Modernizing child care in Ontario](#) is longer on questions than answers. Perhaps that's wise for a sector that feels it is not sufficiently consulted. If viewed as a conversation starter, it provides an opportunity to build a consensus around much needed changes to early childhood service delivery. What follows is an initial response to the document. The Atkinson Centre will provide a more detailed submission in the coming weeks.

### **Stabilization versus growth**

The ministry's stated goal is to stabilize early childhood services to provide a platform for future growth. More money layered onto a shaky service base has done little to expand access for families over the last two decades. As centres open, others close. If modernization results in real program integration it would improve use of space and resources. This alone would modestly increase access.

The ministry's document hits some of the right notes by zeroing in on funding, quality, policy and accountability.

### **1) Operating Funding Formula**

**What's good:** The paper suggests short-term flexibility for systems managers<sup>1</sup> to weather the transition to full day kindergarten while a funding formula is developed. The formula would be transparent and focus on operating stability while promoting quality and access. Kudos to the ministry for highlighting the imperative to equalize funding for First Nations communities.

**What's next:** A representative working group to transform the two dozen existing funding streams into three: fixed costs (e.g. rent, utilities, professional development), quality promotion (support for the early childhood workforce and the learning environment) and fee subsidies.

**What's missing:** Eligibility for public funding must be tied to access and accountability criteria. Children with exceptional needs and families receiving fee subsidies need to be assured equity of access. It is essential that operators meet educator training and professional development requirements, follow the provincial curriculum for early years programs and maintain quality standards as a condition of funding.

---

<sup>1</sup> Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs)/District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs) and First Nations child care administrators.

Along with child care, Ontario Early Years (OEYCs) and Parenting and Family Literacy (PFLCs) centres are part of a core network of children's services with a shared mandate. All must be included in a modernized early years system. Including OEYCs and PFLCs would permit more coherent operations, better utilize staff and improve linkages to public health and intervention services such as Healthy Babies, Healthy Children and Preschool Speech and Language.

## 2) Capital Funding

**What's good:** A 'schools-first' approach to locating early childhood programs in schools. This makes good use of existing public assets and emphasizes seamless programming for children and convenience for families.

**What's not:** Reconfiguring space without making the necessary changes to age and group sizes is a money-waster. Chopping up kindergarten space into infant and toddler rooms ignores the age groups that now dominate programs and hinders opportunities for developmentally sensible programming with fewer transitions.

**What's next:** As space now used for kindergarten-aged children is converted for younger age groups the physical design needs to be informed by the best evidence.

**What's missing:** Out-of-school programming for children 4-12-years should be accommodated within existing educational space. Indeed the ministry no longer makes capital funding available to create new school-age child care in schools. Integrating K to 12-year-old educational and care space would help free up areas suitable for younger children. Guidelines for school boards protecting early education and after school programming are essential.

## 3) Quality

**What's good:** A new approach to addressing the needs of children with diverse abilities. Also positive are suggestions for mandatory program guidelines for early childhood environments building on the ELECT resource and aligned with the full day kindergarten & extended day program documents to facilitate transition to school.

**What's not:** More information to inform parents' child care choices? The Internet groans with high quality information about what to look for when choosing child care. Parents aren't crying out for information – it's the dearth of available and affordable child care options that has them in tears.

**What's next:** A plan to expand the program approach into all ECE settings including family resource programs, OEYCs and FPLCs.

**What's missing:** An early years program is only as good as its staff. An ongoing professional development strategy for the ECE workforce is an essential partner to new curriculum approaches. Also missing is a strategy to recruit and retain educators who want to work with younger children and their families, particularly as employment opportunities in full day kindergarten syphon off ECEs.

#### **4) Modernized legislative and regulatory framework**

**What's good:** A review of the *Day Nurseries Act* through the lens of new evidence and experiences.

**What's not:** A suggestion that registries of informal providers can provide a pipeline to support quality into the large unregulated sector. No evidence suggests that registries contribute to quality; in fact registries are shown to mislead families into assuming there is public oversight of their child care arrangement.

**More what's not:** A proposal that home child care providers team up to look after larger numbers of children. This is a popular form of regulated care in Quebec. Unfortunately it receives some of the lowest quality ratings. In Quebec licensed providers at least receive pre-service training. There are no similar requirements in Ontario.

The solution to the large numbers of children in informal child care is to expand licensed options; not to squander scarce resources on a false security that quality can be encouraged in the absence of sufficient public funding and oversight.

**What's next:** A representative working group to propose specific alternatives.

**What's missing:** The DNA adequately promotes health and safety, a modernized act need to focus on mechanisms supporting healthy child development. The Toronto Operating Criteria is a validated tool that links quality assessment to the ELECT resource. Results are publicly posted. Consolidating licensing with evaluation and public accountability is a more likely route to program quality.

A major threat to quality is the rapid expansion of for-profit child care, particularly the commercial chains. A moratorium on licensing commercial operators would be prudent during the modernizing process.

#### **5) Support for accountability and capacity building**

**What's good:** Extending the Ontario Education Number to children in licensed child care to support research and evaluation.

**What's not:** Rather than devolve licensing and oversight to local systems managers where it belongs, the document suggests a self-regulatory approach where good operators would be rewarded with less frequent external evaluations while violators receive more regular scrutiny. Troubling is the proposal's tie to the government's Open for Business initiative, suggesting an entrenched view of child care as a private service rather than a public good.

**More what's not:** The paper is correct in stating that volunteer boards do not have the business or pedagogical acumen necessary to direct child care operations. But jumping over systems managers to provide direct training to operators is a losing game in a sector where boards can change two or

more times in a year. Parents want to be involved in their children's early childhood experiences. They don't want responsibility for administrative minutia. Systems managers need the authority to rationalize programs to provide more coherent and sustainable service delivery.

**What's missing:** Data Access Coordinators analyze community assessments of children's well being. Their data are critical to systems planning and accountability. DACs are now housed in various settings throughout the province. They belong with the systems managers.

**What's next?**

The 90-day turn around for responses to the government's document is short and the summer an inopportune season for organized discussion but it is what it is. The Atkinson Centre will develop a more detailed response to the paper in the next weeks focused on achievable goals and timelines. We encourage you to share your views with us.

---

For more information on this topic, as well as about the Atkinson Centre, please visit: [www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson)