
Modernizing the Early Years:
Submission to the Government of Ontario
in Response to
Modernizing Child Care in Ontario

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THE ATKINSON CENTRE

The Atkinson Centre promotes research on child development and early learning policies and practices that serve young children and their families. It is one of twenty-one research centres and institutes at OISE/University of Toronto that facilitate partnerships with other post-secondary institutions and community organizations. The Centre is committed to using the best available evidence to inform public discourse, public policy and the professional learning of early childhood educators and elementary school teachers.

At the Atkinson Centre, we remain dedicated to pursuing learning opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to strengthen their capacity to bridge research with policy and practice through quality learning experiences.

The Atkinson Centre's response to the Province of Ontario's discussion paper, *Modernizing Child Care in Ontario*, draws on extensive evidence documenting the elements that support quality and accessible service delivery. It is informed by consultations with members of the Atkinson Task Force, an alliance of early childhood program operators, professional organizations, parents and educators. The initial Atkinson response, "Atkinson Letter: Modernizing the Early Years", is available online at www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson.

AN INTEGRATED EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICY FRAMEWORK

Informed by national and international evidence, many jurisdictions are taking steps to break down the silos that have plagued the delivery of early childhood services to the detriment of children, families, service providers and taxpayers. New approaches are driven by a more holistic view of families and an understanding that early childhood is a developmental phase beginning at conception and continuing to about age 8. A modern service system designed to meet the needs of today's families involves more than child care. Reworking the early years one service at a time entrenches divisions. Nor is it desirable to have the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services simultaneously working on separate early years frameworks. Public health, family support, early intervention and extended day programs for children are essential elements of coherent system development and require equal consideration.

The Atkinson Centre recommends:

1. A single early childhood policy framework that promotes seamless access to quality child and parenting programs and resources from conception through age 8: this begins with transferring the systems management for Ontario Early Years Centres, Family Resource Programs, Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, Early Literacy coordinators and early intervention services such as Preschool Speech and Language to the Early Learning Division of the Ministry of Education. This would permit more coherent operations, better staff utilization and improve linkages to child and family programs offered by Public Health.

Integrate public health programs

The modern framing of public health should be embedded into a modern framing of early years policy. Public Health plays an important role in the earliest phases of human development through prenatal care, breast-feeding support, parenting programs, early ID, and health promotion programs. However, Healthy Babies Healthy Children is an outlier under the jurisdiction of MCYS. Early years providers and Public Health cooperate at the community level, with Public Health often delivering its programs in children's services environments. It is therefore logical to replicate this cooperation at the policy level through a joint ministerial committee for health and education responsible for child and family services.

2. Situate oversight for HBHC in the Ministry of Health with other Public Health child and family programs.
3. Establish a joint ministerial committee to facilitate the linkages between Public Health, education and other early childhood services.

Address inequities in Aboriginal programming

Service integration presents particular challenges for some Aboriginal communities due to colonial relationships, the chronic underfunding of Aboriginal education and the many and complex funding and legislative arrangements with First Nations and federal and provincial governments for early education, child care, family support and early intervention programming. Complexity doesn't excuse inaction and we are pleased the discussion paper promotes solutions.

4. Take this opportunity to address the funding and program issues challenging many First Nations by ensuring equitable funding and infrastructure supports are provided.

INCREASING ACCESS TO EARLY EDUCATION

Starting in the late 1980s the Flexible Services Development project experimented with many of the ideas proposed in this discussion paper—child care registries for unlicensed child minders, licensing of mini-daycares to allow two providers to team up to care for more children and plenty of parent information schemes.¹ These projects never made it past the pilot phase because they did not work.² 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 arrangements. A category of ‘home child care light’ for a second tier of family providers is used in other jurisdiction with unpromising results.³ It would open agencies to liability and become a drain on limited resources.

The solution to the large numbers of children in informal child care is to expand early childhood program options; not to squander scarce resources on a false security that quality can be encouraged in the absence of sufficient public funding and oversight. The assumption that parents would choose unregulated, questionable care over a system with qualified educators and public oversight is unfounded. The ministry would never promote education delivered by the ‘lady down the street’; it should not risk young children’s development by entrenching unregulated care.

5. The province should adopt a three-year strategy that includes a service target of 75% of preschool children with regular access to an early years program.⁴
6. The ministry abandon plans to extend child care registries and two-tiered, in-home child care.

In the underground child care market providers do not give receipts or claim income for taxation. In exchange for lower fees parents give up the Child Care Tax Deduction. Without sufficient incentives, enforcing registration compliance in these arrangements will be difficult and expensive. Incentives without quality assurances waste public resources.

If the goal is to improve outcomes for children in informal care, we recommend expanding access to regular, consistent early childhood education through existing programs.

¹ Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. (1989). New directions for child care. Toronto, Ontario: Author.

² Doherty, G. (1994). Rural child care in Ontario. Occasional Paper No. 4. Toronto, Ontario: Childcare Resource and Research Unit, Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto. <http://www.childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/op4.pdf> describes the limitations of group family day care delivery. Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, Child Care Branch. (1988). Flexible services development project, Pilots: Criteria and conditions. Toronto, Ontario: Author reported on the limitations of child care registries.

³ Quebec’s focus on home child care as a less expensive option to group care has left it vulnerable to quality concerns. BCs practice of Licensed-not-required providers now consumes half the province’s child care budget.

⁴ Since all four and five year olds are slated for full day kindergarten within the next three years this is a modest and achievable goal.

This can take a number of forms:

- Licensed child care centres could be encouraged to offer part-day programs with flexible attendance options opening up licensed care as an alternative for more families.
 - OEYC's, FRC's and PFLC's should be aligned with a common mandate to provide a consistent program of early education as an explicit goal. By adopting the ELECT curriculum delivered by ECEs these services could readily expand preschool options in a cost-effective manner. With active outreach to at-home parents and caregivers these services could serve most preschool-aged children not using licensed care. By connecting all these programs to education under the same provincial policy framework and local systems management, the transition for children into kindergarten would be less stressful.⁵
7. Expand access to early childhood education by making it an explicit mandate for all early childhood settings including OEYC's and FRC's.

Strengthen quality in licensed home child care

If licensed home child care is to move beyond child minding, attention needs to be paid to the training and support of providers.

8. At least 80 hours of pre-service training in early childhood development, delivered by a post-secondary training institution, should be required for home child care providers.
9. At least 40 hours of annual in-service training be required as a condition of licensing. Both pre- and in-service training would be credited towards an ECE diploma.⁶

A more integrated model of service delivery should permit providers broader access to the resources of group child care, early ID and family support programming. The addition or expansion of licensed stand-alone home child care agencies should be limited to special circumstances.

Limit expansion of the for-profit sector

Considerable research throughout Canada and internationally indicates that quality is likely to be higher when the operator is a public or non-profit agency. The percentage of commercial child care provision has grown in Ontario from 17% in 2001 to 25% today. Much of the expansion has occurred through corporate chains. This trend is particularly troubling in the wake of the collapse of the Australian-based ABC transnational and the resulting disruption to families and huge loss of public investment. A strong commercial presence also brings the potential of challenges under trade agreements. Foreign corporate providers could insist on equal treatment with public and community providers requiring schools and other public sponsors to accept a corporate presence.

10. Limit new child care licenses to public and community-based operators.

⁵ This approach is being used quite successfully in BC with its network of Strong Start programs delivered by ECEs as part of the school system. http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/early_learning/strongstart_bc/.

⁶ A course credit towards an ECE diploma averages 40 hours.

Rationalize quality monitoring

Ontario needs one quality assessment tool, which is used in all early childhood settings, including kindergarten. Such a tool can be used to support regional planning and to identify and support areas experiencing challenges. Early childhood advisors should be available in all regions and be grounded in early childhood knowledge. Quality assurance is not a policing system but an opportunity to improve early learning experiences for young children. While many monitoring tools exist in Ontario, only the City of Toronto's Operating Criteria has been validated and it is tied to the ELECT curriculum. The tool is now being used in other Ontario regions and is being picked up by other provinces.

11. Adopt the Toronto Operating Criteria as an Ontario-wide quality assessment tool. Ensure early childhood advisors are fully trained in the tool and that ratings are publicly available.

Adopt ELECT as the provincial early years program guide

A long consultation process that included researchers, educators and practitioners from early childhood, education and family support contributed to the development of ELECT. ELECT allows for flexibility in curriculum but is based on key foundational principles. A regular revision of any curriculum framework is an important process to ensure public accountability and appropriate linkages within an integrated early learning system.

12. Embed the ELECT principles in any new early years policy framework.
13. Adopt ELECT as the program guide for all early years settings.
14. Support training institutions to deliver accessible training in ELECT for ECEs and other early childhood practitioners.
15. Curriculum is not static; continue to invest in the development of ELECT.

Early Childhood Educators

Early childhood training has a long established history that bridges research with practice. Early childhood expertise blends child development, family support and programming for children with special needs. Quality is influenced by educators' knowledge of early childhood development. Attention needs to be paid to the ongoing professional development needs of educators, particularly in the area of special needs.

16. Work in consultation with the College of Early Childhood Educators to develop standards for regular mandatory professional development as a condition of continued registration. All training should lead to credential enhancement.
17. Develop a streamlined articulation process between early childhood education and teacher education.

The professional partnerships in kindergarten classrooms have many lessons to offer. Teaming early childhood educators with teachers and the school infrastructure is already showing highly promising outcomes for children. The integration of early childhood professionals working in child care, family support, intervention and home child care, can, and will improve opportunities for young children.

LEGISLATION

Ontario needs an Early Years Act, reflecting a new policy framework that envelops licensed child care, home child care, Ontario Early Years Centres, Family Resource Programs and Parenting and Family Literacy Centres and is linked to Public Health child and family services.

Strengthen the early childhood workforce

18. To support quality in early childhood settings the Atkinson Centre recommends the following changes:

- In group licensed child care, 2/3 of all educators should be registered with the College of ECE.
- In home child care agencies, all consultants should be registered with the College of ECE.
- In OEYCs, FRCs and PFLCs, the core staff should be registered with the College of ECE.
- A degree in early childhood development that includes advanced courses in organizational development and human resource management should be required for early childhood advisors, all program directors and consultants working in home child agencies.

Update staff ratios and group sizes

19. Upon further consultation with early childhood program leaders and practitioners, the Atkinson makes the following recommendations regarding staff/child ratios and group sizes:

- For infant/toddler groups including children up to and including 24 months, a ratio of 1:4 with similar flexibility as in the existing DNA for under age and over age children. Maximum group size of 12.
- For preschool groups including children from 24 months up to and including 48 months, a ratio of 1:7 with similar flexibility as the existing DNA for under age and over age children. Maximum group size of 21.
- For extended day programs including children from 4-8 years, a ratio of 1:13 with similar flexibility as the existing DNA for under age and over age children. Maximum group size of 26.

Special consideration should be given to the needs of older children enrolled in school based extended day programs. Principles from the Waterloo District Youth Development Programs should be taken under advisement with further consideration of how legislation tied to recreation programs may be more suitable for this age group.

SYSTEMS MANAGEMENT AND FUNDING

Systems planning is essential to service stability. Regional systems managers are best suited to plan, support and monitor early learning services in conjunction with local school boards. Integrated policy oversight under the Early Learning Division at the province should be mirrored at the regional level with Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSM) and District Social Service Administration Boards (DSSAB) assuming the systems management of all early years services, including OEYCs and PFLCs.

Licensing best belongs with the body responsible for local planning to support service stability and encourage program integration. To discourage further service fragmentation, new licenses should be awarded to stand-alone operators only under exceptional circumstances.

Data Access Coordinators (DACs) analyze community assessments of children's well being. This information is critical to systems planning and accountability. DACs are now housed in various settings throughout the province. They belong with the systems managers. Where additional resources are required to assume these responsibilities, the province should provide a transition plan.

20. Transfer responsibility for OEYCs, PFLCs and early identification and intervention programs including Preschool Speech and Language to CMSMs/DSSABs.
21. Transfer responsibility for child care licensing to CMSMs/DSSABs.
22. Transfer responsibility for DACS to CMSMs/DSSABs.
23. Develop guidelines for licensing to encourage service consolidation under public or community –based multi-service operators whose core mandate is children's services.

Fund for quality and stability

A new funding formula should be built on a transparent and accountable policy framework. It should be indexed and recognize local pressures such as wait lists, access, geographical and demographic factors. The CMSMs and DSSABs are well positioned to advise on funding matters.

24. Reconfigure the multiple early years funding streams into two:
 - a. Base funding for eligible early years programs which covers fixed operating cost, including professional development.
 - b. Fee subsidies for families using applicable programs.
25. Tie operator eligibility for public funding to access and accountability criteria. Access to children with special needs, to families receiving fee subsidies and to the maintenance of quality standards should be a condition of funding.
26. Repeal Ontario Regulation 221/11, section 17(4), that requires all parents enrolled in extended day/year programs to subsidize the cost of services for children with special needs. This practice is inequitable and should be eliminated.

27. Access to quality programming for children should not be tied to their parents' workforce attachment. Family income should be the only eligibility criteria for child care fee subsidies.

Strengthen the integration of schools and early childhood programs

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

Out-of-school hours programming for children 4-12-years should be accommodated within existing educational space. Integrating K-12-year-old education and care would help free up space in schools suitable for younger children. The integration of child care and education means programs serving preschool children must receive equal consideration when allocating school space. While many school boards have been exemplary in assuming their responsibilities for early years programs others have not. This indicates the province cannot rely on guidelines to ensure integrated behaviors.

28. Modify the education funding formula to include space and infrastructure supports such as maintenance and administration for school-located early years programs.
29. Where early years programs are located in public buildings no rental fees should be charged.

CONCLUSION

The modernization of early childhood services system is long overdue in Ontario. The task is complex but never before has the sector been as ready to accept change. This affords government a rare opportunity to do the bold reengineering required. In addition to the feedback from this consultation, the blueprint for change outlined in *Our Best Future in Mind* is available to draw on. There are also lessons to be learned from other jurisdictions both inside Canada and abroad to point us towards success and help avoid pitfalls.

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