

CUPE 4400 Response to “Modernizing Child Care”

Need for Child Care Policy Framework

The Government of Ontario has recently begun a conversation about a long term vision for child care in Ontario; its discussion paper, “*Modernizing Child Care in Ontario*”, while putting forward five guiding principles and a long term vision focuses primarily on short term actions intended to maintain and improve “service in the current system rather than growing the system through creating of new child care spaces and subsidies”.

While it is important to acknowledge the short term fiscal constraints, it is crucial that the short and medium term initiatives do not impede the ability to ultimately transform Ontario’s child care system into a system that works for all Ontario’s children families and communities.

The proposed long-term vision and principles need to be grounded in a policy framework in order to design a system that works. Simply laying groundwork over the next three years for “new child care spaces and subsidies” will not achieve the reform that is necessary.

While acknowledging the need to address some DNA issues such as changes to age groups and simplification of funding transfers to CMSMs, “modernizing” as envisioned in the discussion document is akin to putting a new coat of paint on a house whose foundation has proven to be weak, unsuitable for the 21st century Ontario and that has eroded over time and is in danger of collapsing.

Some proposals floated in the document, such as risk-based licensing which would treat child care services in the same way as the province licenses alcohol serving establishments, suggests a basic lack of understanding of the nature of child care sector.

Throughout the document the word “quality” is used many times rather carelessly given that the very little is known about quality of child care in Ontario, other than that it is, generally, mediocre at best. Indeed, the document demonstrates little understanding what the critical determinants of quality are.

For these reasons alone it is important that, before making any incremental steps in unknown directions, the provinces undertakes a wider, deeper discussion of child care policy framework.

Paying a lip-service to the report commissioned by the Government of Ontario from Dr. Pascal, is insufficient without a strong commitment to the values underpinning that report; we have already seen with the changes to the third-party operators policy how easy it is for the governments to back away from the essential recommendations of the report.

CUPE 4400 proposes that without a clear child care policy framework the province should not proceed with any changes in DNA or funding structure that could lead to long term negative effects for children and families. In addition, CUPE 4400 feels that Dr. Pascal’s report “*With Our Best Future In Mind*” presents a good starting point for a discussion about the policy framework which would guide the redesign and transformation of Ontario’s child care system.

Part II – CUPE 4400 Proposes Elements of a Child Care Policy Framework

1. Child care policy is within the mandate of provincial governments, and federal government approval or support is neither required nor necessary; yes, it would be beneficial to have a national child care policy framework, but not having one is not an excuse for the province to sit on its hands.
2. Child care is a service that is essential to wellbeing of children, families and communities. This means that child care services should be managed as a public service and not being left to market forces alone.
3. In order to provide access for all those families who require child care, services should be publicly planned, funded and delivered. In the short run, moratorium on new commercial operations should be established and enforced on a province wide basis.
4. Because quality child care is essential to the well-being of communities, local service management, within a strong provincial policy framework, is necessary to ensure that specific community needs are considered and met. Licensing should be transferred to CMSMs including authority to refuse new licenses where these would lead to destabilization of the system.
5. Given the risks associated with low quality care, a strong regulatory framework and enforcement is required...this is the equivalent of parking enforcement. At the same time child care centres must be supported in provision of quality services.
6. *Until such time when all early learning and care services are provided at no cost to those who use them,* parental contribution to costs should be limited to a predefined percentage of net income and completely eliminated for families with incomes below poverty line or with children with extraordinary special needs.
7. Because child care serves important role in supporting child development and learning, access to care should not be tied to work or study status of parents.
8. Publicly funded program space in school and municipal buildings should be available free of charge to child care programs.
9. A true integration of child care and education means that needs of child care programs serving preschool children must be taken into account when planning for space in schools. In some cases this may lead to redrawing of school boundaries and/or relocation of upper primary grades to other locations in order to accommodate truly integrated child and family services.
10. Parental involvement with their child's learning and care is essential, but it does not have to be through participation in management of the child care service or fundraising to maintain the service.

Part III – In Pursuit of Quality in Early Learning and Care

1. Quality is a layered, complex concept that is as much about the ongoing process within the program as about structural factors including the physical, organization, human resource and system management components.
 - a. Quality is a function of several factors which include relevant education, ongoing training, stable workforce, equitable wages and benefits, appropriate group sizes and staff child ratios.
 - b. All child care supervisors should hold the equivalent of B.A in Early Childhood Education, including advanced courses in organizational development and management.
 - c. Ongoing training for ECE staff should be mandatory and at no cost to staff.
 - d. Good physical accommodation, including sufficient indoor and outdoor space not only reflects the value society places on child care, but is also essential to healthy development and safety.
2. Quality must be viewed within the local and provincial contexts.
3. Parents are often required to make child care decisions in environment of insufficient supply of affordable child care; the “choice” that the government talks about is often not a choice at all, but the only care available. In that context, the presumption of informed parental choice about selecting and sustaining “quality” child care arrangement is an empty and unrealistic expectation.
4. Quality should not be determined by the ability to pay or the social and/or economic status of families or communities. Access to good learning and care must not be a class issue.
5. Quality is about ongoing assessment and documentation, (including self-assessment, learning and teaching stories), and not about ongoing measurement of progress towards predefined learning outcomes.
6. Quality in child care programs should not be defined in terms of “readiness” for school or, indeed, kindergarten.
7. While recognizing individual needs of children and families, it is important to acknowledge that overall development of social and cognitive skills for young children is best accomplished in a high quality group child care. Although exceptional home child care providers, nannies and babysitters may exist, available evidence suggests that least

“learning” occurs in private home and informal care settings, and that these settings are the forced “choice” of the families with least economic, educational and social resources.

8. Quality means that all child care programs are capable of including children with special needs. Long waiting lists and overloading of existing child care programs with special needs children is not an answer to lack of facilities, resources and staff with appropriate training.
9. Integrating children with special needs is the responsibility of all staff in child care programs. It is difficult for any child to develop the all-important sense of belonging when left in care of one specialized staff.
10. Horizontal (for a child of given age) and vertical (for a child moving through age groups) integration of learning and care services is the best way of providing optimal support for children and families. Children should not have to experience transitions between different curricula and pedagogical practices.
11. Curriculum should focus on developing social and cognitive skills; each child should feel that they belong and that they are active partners in their learning.
12. Quality costs; delivering quality care despite low wages, minimum benefits, untrained staff and overcrowded facilities is not sustainable or equitable.