

POLICY MONITOR #4

April 21, 2011

To: The Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Re: Bill 173, Amendments to the Education Act

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The Atkinson Centre is a well-established research centre at OISE, University of Toronto with a strong commitment to a foundation in healthy child and family development. The work of the Atkinson Centre is grounded in evidence-based research that promotes sound policy development and support to practitioners in early learning and family support. The Atkinson Centre is involved in numerous research initiatives including *The Kids, Families and Places* study which examines the simultaneous influence of neighbourhood, family and childcare contexts on preschool children's development; the *Toronto First Duty* study, a decade long research project that has evaluated integrated early learning and family support programs, and is also involved in the *evaluation of full day kindergarten in Ontario*. We have recently established an Atkinson Centre Early Years Task Force with experts from school boards, municipalities, community partners, post-secondary institutions and labour organizations representing both urban and rural communities across Ontario. The task force was established to develop a comprehensive approach for the implementation of an early years framework, including extended day programs and child and family centres in Ontario.

There are three points I would like to share with the committee today which I hope will influence the committee's proposal to amend the Education Act to allow third party operators to deliver extended day programs.

First, the findings from the Toronto First Duty Program demonstrate the critical value in a seamless approach to early learning and family support. These findings helped inform the implementation of full day kindergarten in Ontario that now includes a team of early childhood educators and teachers sharing their expertise to deliver a developmentally enriched program. The TFD findings indicate that with increased integration, the quality of programming improves.

The next step to building on the leadership that the government of Ontario has shown thus far is to expand the delivery of early learning by facilitating continuing support for school board operated extended day programs. An integrated approach to early learning has demonstrated that a seamless approach is absolutely central to the cohesion that children experience, and their parents experience as well. A single operator is essential to removing the many disruptions in child's day.

Improving access to high quality programs should be a priority for the government. In no jurisdiction does a mixed delivery system meet the needs of more than 30% of children and families. Only in jurisdictions where there is public delivery do families find reasonable access to quality child care. Like education, families that work and parents who are enrolled in school should be entitled to childcare support. Governments that do not respond to the reality of families today miss an opportunity to support the workforce of today and tomorrow.

Secondly, the delivery of extended day programs and summer programs should and can be delivered by school boards with the right kind of supports and mechanisms in place. There are a number of boards that are taking the initiative to develop innovative ways to provide full day extended programs for our youngest students and ought be congratulated for swimming against the tide. The Atkinson Centre is developing case studies to highlight what drives success and what creates challenges. For example, a northern school board in

Ontario is offering the full range of early learning programming as outlined in the Premier's report on early learning. This has meant designing a schedule that meets the needs of the families in those communities, and at the same time creating additional early childhood jobs within the communities. The costs of the programs are a barrier for many families, and additional funding to reduce the fees and increase subsidies is necessary. However, the school board is working closely with the local municipality to bridge that gap and are delivering a program in a seamless way, because they recognize the return value in supporting children that are more secure and parents that are less worried about outside school arrangements.

In an urban school board in Ontario, the extended day program delivered by the school board has been extremely popular with families and is expanding significantly to meet the needs for new programs in the fall. We see the convenience value of school board delivered programs, but more important, we see possibilities to enrich children's daily experiences without the disruptions of moving from one program to another, under separate operators and with different educators. School boards in Ontario are committed to offering high quality programs but naturally need infrastructure support and advice on the most effective mechanisms for implementation. The government of Ontario needs to establish supports that enable this to happen in a system wide way. The report to the premier was designed to avoid overlap and create efficiencies. There are savings by having school boards operate programs for children 4-12 that can be passed on to strengthen and expand programs for the terribly under served 0-3 year olds.

Finally, these amendments to the education act as they stand, pave the way for privatized for-profit services within a publicly mandated system. Why would the Ministry of Education that until very recently worked with school boards to offer extended day programs, now be open to third party operators without any provision to ensure that these operators be limited to the non-profit sector? Just as it would be inconceivable to privatize our publicly funded education system, it is unconscionable that early learning programs in schools should be privatized.

The Atkinson Centre grounds its work in evidence based policy recommendations. We know that a public system offers consistency and seamlessness without differentiating between childcare and learning. Significant amount of Canadian research (Cleveland 2008; Friendly 2011) demonstrates the link between poorer quality and for-profit programs. With the government able to provide so few reassurances to families about the quality of their children's early learning programs clearly documented in recent media reports, the very least it could do is opt for the most likely option where quality can be found.

Ontario has made important strides in developing education systems that are publicly operated and publicly accountable. We are already seeing evidence of how full day kindergarten is a huge success for children, for families and for educators. This is an opportunity to entrench principles of universality and accessibility for all of Ontario's children. This perspective recognizes early childhood development to be an important determinant of health and well-being over the life course. A publicly operated, seamless approach to program delivery will ensure holistic development of children, promote equitable access to education and a continuity of services for all children and their families.

In closing, the government of Ontario should ensure that extended day and summer programs continue to be delivered by school boards in Ontario. If necessary the government of Ontario should build on the strengths of a public education system, and limit any external operators to the not for profit sector only.