

MODERNIZING THE EARLY YEARS

“We need to synthesize our programs, simplify our mandates and increase accessibility based on what each community needs. Ultimately, it is up to all of us to reduce the fragmentation of how a family in the community experiences child and family services.”

Tony Diniz, Executive Director, Child Development Institute, Toronto

Early years programs are undergoing significant changes in Ontario. Full day kindergarten will be available to all 4-and 5-year-old children by 2014. School boards are required to secure extended day options where there is sufficient demand. Child care programs are repurposing to serve younger aged children and their families.

Schools and child care now reside under the same policy and administrative unit in the Ministry of Education but are treated quite differently. Full day kindergarten is a public program with funding for educators, new classrooms and professional learning. Child care remains a private service that needs to transition to its new role.

The province's April 20, 2012 announcement of \$242 million to the child care sector over three years provides an opportunity to modernize the early years, to create a comprehensive early years policy framework that includes; a new funding formula, reorganizes new age groupings and group sizes and

enhances quality with a province-wide curriculum framework and new training supports. These actions can stabilize existing programs and create a viable platform to expand services for families.

The Atkinson Letter (AL) spoke to selected innovators to gather their ideas about the next steps in early childhood programming. Nancy Dickieson is the Director of Children's Services for the Region of Waterloo; Tony Diniz is the Executive Director of the Child Development Institute in Toronto; Karen Gray is the Director of Service System Planning and Policy Development in the Children's Services Division at the City of Toronto; Lois Mahon is the Executive Director of Child Care Resources in Sudbury and is the President of the College of Early Childhood Educators; and Patricia Chorney Rubin is the Director of the School of Early Childhood and Community Services at George Brown College in Toronto. From their comments the AL has formulated a number of proposals to help stimulate the discussion around new policy directions.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Medical research has demonstrated that the most rapid period of brain development occurs in the first few years of life and that the experiences of early childhood have an enduring effect on an individual's future learning, health and behaviour:

- *Brain development that takes place prenatally and in the first year of life is more rapid and extensive than previously suspected;*
- *Brain development is much more vulnerable to environmental influence;*
- *The influence of early environment on brain development is long lasting;*
- *The environment affects not only the number of brain cells and number of connections among them, but also the way these connections are "wired";*
- *Early stress has a negative impact on brain development;*
- *Quality early childhood programs improve children's outcomes by reducing family stress and optimizing the developmental environment.*

1. FUNDING

DIRECT NEW FUNDING TO YOUNGER CHILDREN UNDER A STREAMLINED FUNDING FORMULA

The education of children from kindergarten onward is base-funded for six hours a day, 194 days a year. Funding to expand kindergarten to a full school day is substantial and if schooling is coupled with extended day/extended year program options, it can meet the education and care needs of families. No similar public contribution exists for younger children. New funding should therefore be integrated into a streamlined funding formula focused on early learning services for preschoolers.

Funding reorganization requires time and one time resources; a commodity the sector lacks. Karen Gray notes that 23 percent of Toronto's child care spaces are vulnerable while 20,000 children are waiting for a fee subsidy. All those interviewed by the AL advocate the reorganization of Ontario's outmoded patchwork of multiple funding streams. But to deal with critical pressures, the first year of new funding for child care should be expedited under existing processes to stabilize programs as they transition.

ESTABLISH A NEW FUNDING FORMULA

Common oversight and new funding creates an opportunity to design a funding mechanism that is more equitable while acknowledging differences in regional costs.

The current funding of child care programs through grants can not meet the demands of a new early years system. With a child care system designed to support the youngest children a funding formula has to address access and affordability for families without compromising the salaries of early childhood educators. A workable funding formula for the early years would include fixed costs including rent and utilities and those associated with potential revisions to age groupings, group sizes and professional development. The funding formula should

be developed in partnership with regional governments.

To be eligible for funding, operators must ensure equity of access to all children including those with exceptional needs, agree to enroll families receiving child care subsidies, meet training requirements and follow the provincial curriculum for early years programs.

“We need stable funding with a strong mandate focused on what children and families need,” says Tony Diniz. “At the end of the day, we need a paradigm shift to get us out of the market model of delivering children’s programs.”

2. SYSTEMS MANAGEMENT

GIVE REGIONAL SYSTEMS MANAGERS AUTHORITY TO RATIONALIZE SERVICE DELIVERY

Regional authorities are key to systems planning but only the provincial government can set the direction to drive the system, says Nancy Dickieson. “Municipalities, school boards, unions and community organizations cannot tackle the governance structure, unless mandated by the government, because they don’t own the service contracts,” she adds. “Communities are coming together out of goodwill to plan a more cohesive approach to systems integration; however, a clear mandate would ensure these initiatives will not be short lived.”

Lois Mahon argues that programs and regional authorities need to think more broadly about promoting service integration: “Everyone has a different interpretation of language, structure, capacity and what systems integration means. That’s why it goes back to the Early Learning Division to set the governance directives. For example, the OEYC mandate required organizations to merge unless they had a unique value added service. We need radical change at a higher level to rationalize a system where families can receive seamless services on the ground.”

Tony Diniz agrees: “In one downtown Toronto community five child care centres compete to

the same organization, it would make a huge difference in rationalizing services.”

“We can consider a mechanism like the Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs), where people feel the mandate to work differently and are adequately supported with resources to realign their priorities,” he says.

“Like in a LHIN where you may have four hospitals working complementarily with one cancer unit, one pediatric unit etc., child and family centred programs can realign to work in concert. It doesn’t always require a merger, but it does require joint planning to identify and capitalize on the value that each organization brings to the community.”

DEVOLVE CHILD CARE LICENSING TO REGIONAL SYSTEMS MANAGERS

Under current standards any operator that meets minimal criteria is entitled to a child care license. Where programs are located and the families they serve are entirely the purview of the operator. Yet establishing programs outside of a regional plan can destabilize existing centres and disrupt attempts at equitable access. The control of licensing should therefore reside with regional systems managers as part of the processes for planning and oversight.

INCLUDE ONTARIO EARLY YEARS CENTRES (OEYCS) AND PARENT AND FAMILY LITERACY CENTRES (PFLCS) AND DATA ANALYSIS COORDINATORS (DACs) IN REGIONAL PLANNING AND OVERSIGHT

OEYCs remain under the direction of the regional offices of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. Oversight for PFLCs resides in the Ministry of Education outside the Early Learning Division. These programs are part of a network of children’s services with a shared mandate. Properly, they belong under the policy oversight

“Service duplication wastes resources,” says Lois Mahon. “OEYCs and child care subsidies are all rationalized based on numbers, but these contracts need to be coordinated to avoid duplication.”

of the Early Learning Division and the systems management of regional authorities.

Data Analysis Coordinators provide the systems supports necessary to plan and lead a new early years system. There is no cost to the transfer but the benefits to the system would be significant.

3. ENHANCING QUALITY

ADOPT A PROVINCE-WIDE QUALITY ASSESSMENT TOOL

Consistency in standards enables the development of a system of quality enhancement that is mandated and supported by a provincial infrastructure. Numerous tools have been developed in Ontario to evaluate and encourage quality. For the most part, the process is a self directed and voluntary. The Toronto Operating Criteria is a validated and accessible tool. Grounded in a commitment to excellence in practice and accountability for public funds, the operating criteria are worth considering for all early childhood settings.

REFORM AGE GROUPINGS TO REFLECT NEW REALTIES

Four-year-olds are moving into full day kindergarten while babies are entering early childhood programs as they reach their first birthdays. It is time to rethink age groupings to reflect this new reality and promote program efficiencies. The AL is therefore proposing new age grouping and staffing requirements for licensed child care.

- For infants up to 24 months of age, the maximum group size would be 12 with three staff, two of whom must have an ECE diploma. Where three infants are under 12 months, an additional staff would be required.
- For children from 25 months of age to kindergarten entry, the maximum group size would be 18 with three staff, two of whom must have an ECE diploma.

Raising requirements so a minimum of two thirds of educators have ECE credentials reflects the expectations parents and the public have of early years programs and acknowledges the critical contribution of trained educators to program quality.

Some agencies are already blending age groups. The George Brown College lab schools have combined infants and toddlers in two rooms with a common sleep room and flexible staff to ensure ratios are maintained at all times. “It has been a phenomenal success,” says Patricia Chorney Rubin. “By widening the lens we can create more flexibility. This is an optimal time for the early childhood community to contribute to the modernizing of the *Day Nurseries Act*.”

DEVELOP LEADERSHIP IN THE EARLY YEARS SECTOR

Child and family consultants, working under regional authorities are required to coach and mentor educator teams in curriculum and pedagogy and to ensure program effectiveness and accountability.

Existing positions and resources that now support the provisions of the DNA, family literacy initiatives, Ontario Early Years Centres, and the municipal administration of the child care system can be repositioned to support continuous learning opportunities and best practice.

The AL also recommends a provincial strategy to support accredited professional learning opportunities for leaders and practitioners in the early childhood profession.

ADOPT ELECT AS THE COMMON CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK IN ALL EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT) was developed by early childhood educators and teachers as a framework to guide practice in early childhood settings for children from infancy to third grade. It is the basis for the

Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program. ELECT aligns early years programming with education, reducing transitions for children. The province should adopt ELECT as an Ontario framework to build on its foundation of research and developmentally enriched practice. ECE graduates should be grounded in ELECT and it should be mandated for all early childhood settings including OEYCs, PFLCs and family resource programs. Similar to the consultation process on the FDELK Program Draft, the use of ELECT should include a province-wide review process.

CONCLUSION

This is an exciting period for early childhood programming in Ontario—an opportunity to think big—to drag child care out of its outmoded welfare origins and position it as the first tier of early childhood development and family support. Suggested here are minimal changes intended to rationalize service delivery, promote cost efficiencies while enhancing program quality and to improve access. We encourage you to join in the discussion and let your views be known.

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For more information about modernizing the early years visit the Atkinson Centre website at: www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson.