

Family-Friendly Schools Spell Success!

“An integrated system of early learning and care that is universally accessible, publicly funded and school based is worth pursuing if you value public education.”

Catherine Fife, OPSBA

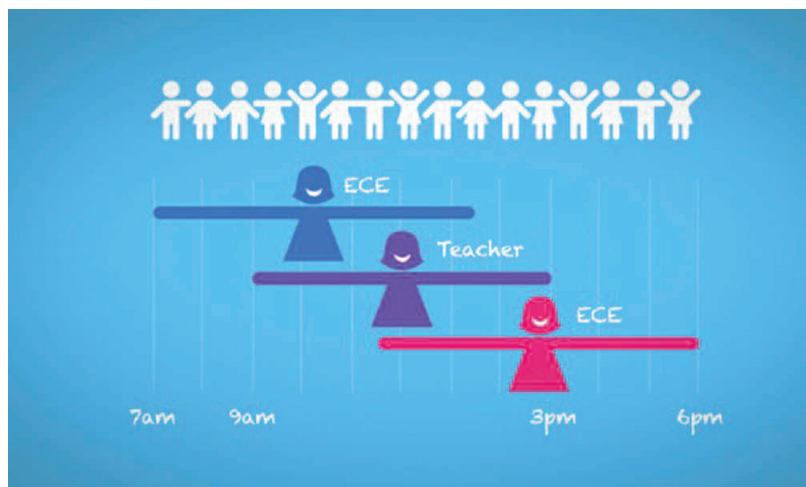
The report on full day early learning, envisioned family-friendly schools where, “...hours after the last bell has rung the school is still buzzing. Parents come and go, picking up children who have participated in extended programming. There are recreational, arts, and social activities and homework clubs for the children, and a concurrent parenting program is running.”¹

Released in June 2009, the report launched a new discussion about the role of schools. No longer were these important community assets 9 to 3 operations, rather they were to become full day, year-round centres, housing child and family programming for babies to adolescents in one accessible location. Ontario was to create the early learning and child care program that has for so long alluded the rest of the country. Instead of constructing a new program from scratch, the plan was to build on the structures already present in publicly funded schools. The learning revolution began with full day kindergarten but it has stalled there. The full service,

year-round school concept is on the back burner and with no transition plan in place, child care programs are floundering.

But some schools are taking up the challenge. The Atkinson Centre talked to four trailblazers in two Ontario communities who are showing how it can be done. Catherine Fife is the President of the Ontario Public School Board Association (OPSBA) and a school trustee with the Waterloo Region District School Board. Mike Carson is the Superintendent of Facilities for the Ottawa Carlton District School Board and oversees child care and recreational programs in schools. Eleanor Heap is the Early Learning Coordinator for the Ottawa Carlton District School Board. Kim Hiscott is the Executive Director of Andrew Fleck Child Care Services in Ottawa, a large non-profit

agency providing early learning and care at both school and community sites. Waterloo and Ottawa are two school boards offering full day, seamless programming for kindergarten and school aged children.



1. With our Best Future in Mind, 2009, p. 16

Integrating child care and kindergarten to create a seamless day ...

The school is open from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Children arrive between 7 and 9 a.m. and leave between 3 and 6 p.m. An early childhood educator (ECE) greets children at 7 a.m. and stays until 2 p.m. A second ECE begins at 11 a.m. and stays to close the program at 6 p.m. The teacher's day begins around 9 a.m. and ends around 3 p.m. The overlap allows the full team to connect over program plans and to discuss the children's progress.

An informed member of the educator team is always available to discuss the children's day with parents.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF SEAMLESS DAY PROGRAMS TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES?

Catherine: Schools are in every neighbourhood and most can readily adapt to provide the extended day and year round educational care that modern families need. Waiting lists for child care can be eliminated because the facilities are there. Importantly, school operated seamless day programs eliminate the stress children and parents experience when they are forced to juggle between school and daycare. Even shuffling children to after school care programs in the same school building creates stress for children and breaks up the curriculum and play based learning goals. When school boards operate the program it is seamless in all facets and the quality is consistent.

Eleanor: Our schools are open from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. during the school year, including all professional activity days, and December and March breaks. The beauty of the seamless day program is that it offers options for parents of young children to fit into their busy lives. Parents are able to drop their children off early or arrive for a late pick up based on their own work/life schedules. Families have access to parenting information and on site childcare programs for preschoolers, and some schools offer recreational programs for older children in partnership with community service providers. Public health and special needs resources are also available and can be accessed through the school because ECEs are trained in child development and are able to identify special needs in children.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF CONSISTENT STAFFING AND CURRICULUM THROUGHOUT THE DAY?

Catherine: Early indicators show that children are performing better in literacy, numeracy and social

development after the first year of full day kindergarten. Ensuring that the complementary components of our early learning system are given the same attention as kindergarten can only maximize the benefits.

Eleanor: Educators are learning from one another. Early childhood educators bring their child development knowledge and programming skills to the classroom and are gaining a higher level of involvement in language and literacy, while teachers bring their knowledge of curriculum planning and assessment and are developing a new appreciation for how young children learn through play.

WHY SCHOOL BOARD OPERATED?

WHAT HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE BEEN WITH SEAMLESS DAY PROGRAMMING IN YOUR SCHOOL BOARD?

Eleanor: The Ottawa Carleton District School Board decided the seamless day program was the right thing to do and it has been a phenomenal success. Our board is planning to expand the program next year based on the demand from parents. By offering the seamless day program to kindergarten and school-aged children the program is financially viable for the board and affordable for parents and we are able to better bridge the learning from kindergarten into the elementary grades.

WHY ARE SCHOOL BOARDS BEST POSITIONED TO DELIVER SEAMLESS DAY PROGRAMS?

Kim: It's better for the children and it's better for the educators. When two organizations with different staff teams are responsible for the same child, eventually something falls through the cracks. Our agency has operated school based childcare programs and have tried to connect with the school staff to better support children and families, but in reality it is hard to make and sustain those

connections. Some still argue that the before and after school portions of the day should be delivered by child care operators but this negates the benefits of the seamless day. As a childcare operator, I know it is next to impossible to recruit and retain qualified staff willing to work a couple of hours at the beginning and end of the school day. Quite simply, school boards delivering the seamless day are able to offer better wages and working conditions. This allows them to recruit and retain qualified educators who in turn contribute to program quality.

WHAT HAS HELPED THE SEAMLESS DAY PROGRAM TO SUCCEED?

Catherine: Professional training is critical for the educator teams to help understand the different skills and expertise that they each bring to the classroom. This helps to improve communication and develops mutual respect in the team.

Mike: The school board saw the need for an early learning lead position, which we were able to fund this year and it has been an essential investment to have this expertise to support the schools, principals and educator teams during the transition.

Kim: What has worked well in Ottawa is the city's online centralized waiting list for childcare used by all early learning and care programs. By utilizing the city's waiting list and expanding cooperation with its children's services department, the school boards are able to understand and plan to meet the community needs without the added administrative burden of maintaining their own waiting lists. Parents also benefit. They register centrally for their chosen seamless day program rather than having to approach schools individually.

CAN ALL SCHOOL BOARDS DELIVER SEAMLESS DAY PROGRAMS?

Mike: Transportation issues must be dealt with before some school boards are able to deliver the seamless day program and there may very well be a role for non-profits in some rural communities and smaller school districts.

WHAT TOOLS WOULD HELP SCHOOL BOARDS TO CREATE SEAMLESS DAY SCHOOLS?

Catherine: The value of the seamless day program needs to be reflected in the education funding for-

mula and should be part of the core program of the school. Every board should be funded for a lead position to help implement the program. Every board should be legislated and funded to have an early learning education advisory committee that is similar to the special education advisory committee. The committee can have representation from municipalities, non-profit providers, public health, special education supports, school boards, trustees and parents to inform the work of school boards.

Mike: School boards need to build capacity to understand the unique nature of early childhood education at a board wide level. I would encourage school boards to take advantage of the expertise in early childhood. Hire an early learning lead that understands early childhood development. Pick sites that can readily succeed and work with principals to learn about what the community needs. Have some curriculum leadership or instructional coaches to support principals with the new curriculum and planning. Finally, communicate, communicate, communicate. Parents are understandably anxious, as is the current child care community. Success can only come when people understand the full benefits as well as the challenges.

Eleanor: The educator teams in existing seamless day programs have a lot to offer new schools starting the seamless day model, and should be encouraged to share their learning. The first year of implementation focussed on the relationships, training and developing the structures needed to operate the programs but the next year can be more focussed on the program deliverables and child outcomes.

COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

HOW HAS THE SEAMLESS DAY PROGRAM CHANGED YOUR CONNECTION TO THE COMMUNITY?

Catherine: The seamless day program brings parents into the schools and schools into their communities. Schools are paid for by the parents and it makes no sense to lock them up at 3 or 4 p.m. Parents should be able to walk into a community school; know the principal, teachers and school nurses; and access services for their children and families. Our teaching teams tell us that they get to know their children and families better much earlier in the school year because of the seamless day. Having parents dropping off and picking up their children from the classroom

improves communication between parents and educators and is ultimately a win-win solution for the child whose learning, social/emotional and developmental needs are at the forefront of how we plan and deliver early learning and care.

AS A CHILD CARE OPERATOR HOW HAS FULL DAY KINDERGARTEN AFFECTED YOUR AGENCY?

Kim: As an organization we have fully endorsed the vision. We have completed a full service review within our organization and decided that we will focus on services for toddlers to 4 year olds and their families, because we believe that seamless day programs for 4-12 year olds would best be offered by school boards. Our organization is committed to the principles of a universally accessible, publicly funded, system of care and education and our decisions are based on who can best provide the service for children and families.

WHAT ROLE CAN MUNICIPALITIES AND COMMUNITY CHILD CARE OPERATORS PLAY IN DELIVERING A SYSTEM OF EARLY LEARNING AND CARE IN ONTARIO?

Mike: There was not a lot of time for school boards to wrap their heads around the administrative details of subsidies and service delivery so it has been very important to work with the municipality and service providers to make things happen. Improved and constant communication between all stakeholders and support from the Ministry of Education's Early Learning Division will be critical as the seamless day program expands across the province.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

Kim: The focus in Ontario has been on full day kindergarten but so much more could be accomplished by integrating education, child care and family supports across the province. Identifying programs that can be amalgamated, reviewing how new child care licenses are provided and planning with an integration lens are key. Childcare should not be market driven because it is unfair to children and families. We have seen programs open up thinking they are viable, only to close shortly after leaving families scrambling for care and children dealing with a lot of confusion and stress with unnecessary transitions.

Catherine: The recent legislative changes that allow school boards to contract out the before and after school components to third parties, leaves the door open to more fragmentation and privatization of pub-

lic education, poorer quality programs, less collaboration between staff, no continuity of early learning curriculum goals and poorer working conditions for early childhood educators. We need to have best practice supports for implementing early learning and care from the Ministry of Education's Early Learning Division and more honest and transparent communication between all stakeholders to ensure a consistent vision.

School trustees would benefit from further information on the value of investing in early learning and care. Trustees can demonstrate their support of the program and its overall goals through funding and allocating adequate staff to ensure the quality of the program is maintained. As a trustee, my advice to other trustees is that the original vision of an integrated system of early learning and care that is universally accessible, publicly funded and school based is worth pursuing if you value public education.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW MORE?

We encourage readers to learn more about the benefits of school board operated seamless day programs. Please feel free to contact our interviewees via email.

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This is the first of a two-part Atkinson Letter produced in partnership with the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. This letter highlights lessons from the Ottawa Carlton District School Board and complements a video produced by the Atkinson Centre on the first year experiences with full day learning at the Waterloo District School Board. Part II of this letter will address programming for younger children.

For more information about family friendly, seamless day schools visit the Atkinson Centre website at: www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson or contact Executive Director Zeenat Janmohamed zeenat.janmohamed@utoronto.ca