

VISION-BASED CHILD CARE SERVICE PLANNING

(Much of this post is based on my more than twenty-five years managing service planning for child care services in Toronto.)

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Ontario's first "Service Plan for Child Care Services" (1992) came into existence as a negotiated response to successive provincial governments' dislike of Toronto's long-standing effort to move beyond the administration of the child care subsidy system and equitably manage the provision of services across, what was then, Metropolitan Toronto. Additionally, the provision of municipally operated child care centres was a special target, as it is now, regardless the important function they played in the most disadvantaged communities.

Since then, service plans became provincially mandated documents usually produced on a five-year cycle consisting of listening to the service providers and soliciting public input primarily from parents searching for child care or child care subsidy. Rarely there is a formal, public review of the accomplishments since the approval of the previous plan, including the full range of successes and failures. Once approved by the municipal authority, they often undergo minimum public scrutiny, ongoing evaluation and review.

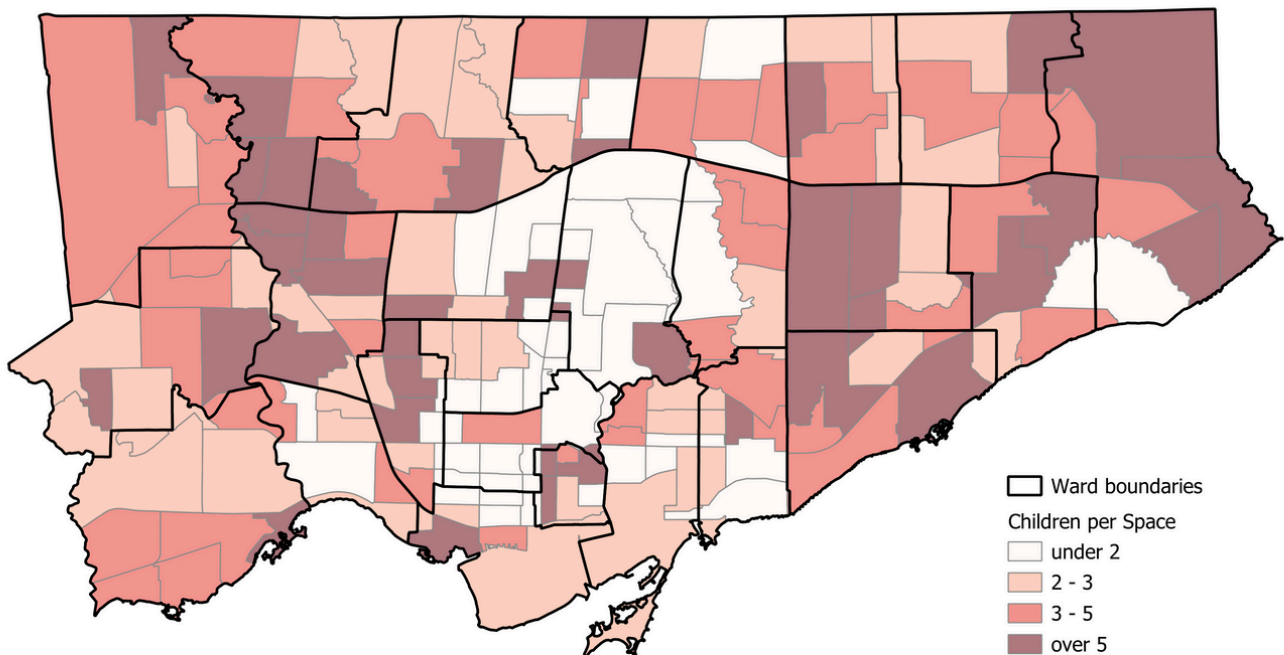
To be more than a bureaucratic exercise in ticking boxes, a Service Plan must be goal oriented, with proposed concrete actions consistent with the overall

vision for children, families and communities. While recognizing that every jurisdiction may have unique service patterns, needs and challenges, the vision underpinning any Service Plan should be based on an explicit political direction, resting on principles of equity and social justice.

For more than 40 years, the City of Toronto has been struggling with the gap in access and quality to child care between its disadvantaged and affluent neighbourhoods. That gap still exists today, especially for children below the age of school attendance.

And while it must be acknowledged that the whole city qualifies as a child care desert with more than three children per licensed space, it also is clear from the map that levels of access vary greatly across the city.

Toronto's Child Care Deserts (3 or more children aged 0 - 4 per licensed space)



Sources: City of Toronto Children's Services via Open Data Toronto, 2021 Census of Canada
Petr Varmuza PhD, June 6, 2024

In 1999, the City of Toronto adopted Children's Strategy declaring that "regardless of the socio-economic status of his/her family and community, every child has the right to childhood experiences which promote the chances of developing into a healthy, well adjusted and productive adult".

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The City's Children's Strategy is based on the belief that society shares with families [the] responsibility for their children and therefore that efforts to improve children's wellbeing are legitimately part of the City's public service agenda. It is also generally well recognized that all families will likely require some measure of public support during their children's developmental years. The City's Children's Strategy recognizes that a universal albeit scaled municipal response to this need is required.

The Children's Strategy demanded consistency and coordination with plans of other sectors including recreation, education, libraries and public health. It led to development of action plans and securing additional municipal funding when the provincial government reduced its funding of child care and other services. Its strength was embedded in the political commitment to equity and well-being of all Toronto's children.

Compared to the Children' Strategy the vision included in the City of Toronto Service Plan 2015-2019 can be regarded as simply too "pedestrian" by stating the obvious that:

"All families in Toronto benefit from a range of services that promote healthy child development and family well-being."

This 2015 – 2019 vision statement in many ways enables the "rising tide lifts all boats" attitude promoted by most service providers and some politicians eager to secure their fair share of new operating and capital funding. In other words, the vision fails to explicitly state that eliminating the equity gaps in access to quality ELCC must be the "prime directive" guiding the development and execution of the Service Plan. Without acknowledging that all boats are not

seaworthy and attending to that need first, the “rising tide ...” approach only enlarges the equity gaps that already exist.

While service providers are essential to meeting the system’s goals, the children and families must be the primary foci of the service plan. Of course, the focus on quality care includes better working conditions, wages and benefits for the full child care workforce. However, our research has shown that, at the beginning of the 2015 – 2019 Service Plan period, the twenty percent of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods when compared to the most advantaged neighbourhoods, had significantly lower proportion of trained staff, lower wages, higher proportion of subsidized children and, most depressingly, lower quality of interactions. Quality of interactions was measured by the validated “Assessment for Quality Improvement” instrument (AQI). Table 1 intentionally excludes the municipally operated programs; those programs operate primarily in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, with high level of trained ECE staff and substantially higher levels of compensation, and AQI scores. Including them in the neighbourhood comparisons would distort the prevailing levels of inequity.

Thus, to be consistent with the City’s Children’s Strategy, the Service Plan must recognize that the “one-size” approach does not fit all and that in underprivileged communities, additional resources must be dedicated to improving the proportion of care delivered by fully trained staff and, where necessary, improved ratios.

1. City of Toronto uses the Child and Family Inequity Score (CFIS), a neighbourhood level measure developed by collaboration between various City departments, academics from Toronto’s colleges and universities, and the child care community. A higher, positive CFIS indicates higher level of disadvantage.

Table 1: Neighbourhood Status Matters

Neighbourhoods			
	Most Disadvantaged	Most Advantaged	Difference
Child and Family Inequity Score	1.19	-1.06	2.25
% Low Income	37.9	10.0	27.9
% Low Mother Education	23.1	4.1	19.0
% Inadequate Housing	43.2	9.3	33.9
Hourly Supervisor Wage	\$31.35	\$35.46	-\$4.11
Hourly ECE Wage	\$20.89	\$23.29	-\$2.40
% of Programing Time Delivered by ECEs	66.6	75.9	-9.3
% Subsidized Children	65.7	19.5	46.2
% One Parent Subsidized Families	61.8	47.1	14.7
AQI Interactions Score	4.10	4.27	-0.17

At the same time, it must be emphasized that not all programs in disadvantaged neighbourhoods deliver lower quality of service or, indeed, that all programs in advantaged neighbourhoods deliver excellent, or even good quality service.

Table 2 compares the quality of preschool programs in the lowest and highest AQI Interactions quintiles. And while again there is a difference on the CFIS indicator, the significantly lower hourly wages for ECE staff and centre supervisors shows the importance of compensation in delivery quality programming, including recruitment of qualified staff.

Table 2: Program Resources Matter

	AQI Quintile		
	Lowest	Highest	Difference
AQI Interactions Score	3.63	4.61	0.98
Hourly Supervisor Wage	\$31.31	\$35.29	-\$3.98
Hourly ECE Wage	\$20.62	\$23.73	-\$3.11
% of Programing Time Delivered by ECEs	65.70	75.20	-9.50
% Subsidized Children	52.50	38.80	13.70
Child and Family Inequity Score	0.31	-0.09	0.40

The forthcoming Service Plan must recognize the disruptive effect that the Covid pandemic and introduction of CWELCC had on the child care “system”. However, it is also important to review the outcomes of the last pre-pandemic Service Plan to assess whether the proposed directions were successfully followed and what barriers were encountered and corrective measures taken. There were some minor improvements in minimum wage and child care staff compensation since 2015, but has the equity gap decreased between the beginning and the end of the Service Plan period? Have the access and quality of programs improved in the disadvantaged neighbourhoods?

Logically then, despite the requirement to periodically produce a document for Council and provincial approval, there is no beginning or end to the service planning process. Imagine a central pillar of equity as the “prime directive” around which the Service Planning process spirals upwards in regular steps of evaluation, updating an action plan, securing resources and execution.

In other words, good Service Plan is a living document, a document that is regularly evaluated, reviewed and, if necessary, updated. The status of Service Plan implementation must be publicly available on a regular basis.

Finally, planning is an activity for all seasons. The Service Plan must address not only growth, but also what principles will drive the actions will be taken if growth does not occur in the anticipated way or, even worse, what actions that will be taken if it does not happen at all, or the essential resources resources decline.

