



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

Ontario Public School Boards' Association

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OPSBA Response to *Building A Better Future: A Discussion Paper for Transforming Early Years and Child Care in Ontario*

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) continues to be an advocate for the importance of transforming the early years and child care in our province. The Association has contributed to many discussions and consultation papers over the past several years. Our boards have been extremely supportive of the implementation of Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) and the addition of the Early Childhood Educator (ECE) to the learning team, the provision of before-and-after care for kindergarten students and most recently the addition of before-and-after care for older children up to the age of 12. Our schools are maintaining successful partnerships with their local community providers, including licensed child care, whose presence is in more than half our schools. We look forward to more information about the government's plan to add 100,000 additional licenced child care spaces in Ontario with some targeted for our schools.

This particular discussion paper focuses on four key pillars for transformation: access, responsiveness, affordability and quality. School boards agree with these pillars as part of a renewed vision that will support our communities, parents and children. FDK and before-and-after care has provided families with more choice and for some parents, the ability to work.

We are also extremely supportive of the government's decisions to provide the early years and child care sector with their own dedicated ministry. We welcome you, Minister Naidoo-Harris to this portfolio. Recently at our Public Education Symposium, we had the pleasure of hearing your address to our membership about the necessary cooperation required between education stakeholders, including school boards and child care providers.

Through our Policy Development Work Team, Early Learning Leads at our member boards and opportunities at ministry discussion tables, OPSBA has gathered many responses on the individual questions posed as well as overall comments concerning the early years and child care.

Common Themes:

Fees, Funding, Shared Space

- Recommendation to review current child care fees and funding source obstacles. Overwhelming feedback that current child care fees in Ontario are skyrocketing with parents unable to afford anything else but fees. Some parents are unable to contribute to their child's RESP until they are out of child care or can only afford part time care. Current fees are now comparable to the cost of private school tuition.
- Recommendation for a broader discussion around shared spaces in schools. Funding for shared space could be more streamlined between the child care and the school, both funded by the Ministry of Education.

Wages and Recognition of Child Care and ECEs

- Recommendation that ECE wages continue to be enhanced to match those in school based settings.
- Recommendation to continue providing regular training and Professional Development opportunities for ECEs.
- Recommendation to monitor supply and demand for ECEs across the province.
- Concern expressed that ECEs are not properly valued by society and are consequently underpaid. Need to promote ECE as an appealing career choice.
- Consideration to be given for a province-wide campaign focussing on the early years and child care similar to that done for the introduction of FDK.

Subsidies

- Recommendation for the province to review current subsidy requirements, placements and wait list lengths. The province needs to consider those that need child care the most -- the working poor.
- Recommendation for more streamlined communications to parents and all education stakeholders about the subsidy process.
- We have been told that a family may receive a child care subsidy but the child care location may not be convenient for the family or where the family wants their child to attend.

Flexibility/Rural Supports

- Recommendation to allow child care centres the flexibility as to how they operate while under quality standards.
- Recommendation for future discussions at working tables about support for non-traditional work hours and support for newcomer families.
- Recommendation for the ministry to review rural challenges; additional funding, qualified staff, transportation.
- Comments expressed that more upfront and thoughtful planning needs to be shared between school boards and municipalities regarding child care planning.

Cross-ministerial Supports

- Recommendation for increased and renewed cross-ministerial supports for families (i.e. Ministry of Long Term Health) beginning early with pre-natal education, new parents and throughout the child's academic life. Suggestions included public health visits, nurse practitioners in schools, information provided at regular physician visits, etc.
- Recommendation for other ministries to consider early years and child care as part of the learning continuum (Minister of Education, Minister of Advanced Skills and Development, Minister of Children and Youth Services and Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport).

Key Discussion Paper Questions:

ACCESS

What does access to early years and child care programs mean to you?

- This means young children are better supported in their early learning and have access to essential resources to promote wellbeing and support to families.
- Seamless learning and care for all children and families.
- Equity and inclusion, better programs for our children, better start to school, relationship building between schools and communities/parents and school staff, increased opportunities for our youngest learners.
- Availability.
- Equity.
- Equity of access for all interested families to high quality well resources programs.
- Available in various geographic areas, supported by subsidies for low income families.
- Access means from the time a child is born until they are 12, families have neighbourhood access to OEYCFCs, infant and toddler child care and b/a school child care in their neighbourhoods, and children attending school should have a seamless day where they are cared for in a school.
- It means that all children will be given the right to have trained adults to care for them and provide a strong beginning to their learning both social and cognitive.
- The provision of consistent care.
- To provide a valuable and seamless experience for parents and their children.

In your experience, what are the strengths of the current system and what are the biggest barriers to parents accessing licensed early years and child care programs in your community?

- There are issues with waiting lists for parents and available spaces in accessible places. There are good partnerships with childcare providers in our district and we hope to strengthen these and continue to support families and young children in our area. We are fortunate to have a good professional employment base to draw from in our communities as our college and university have programming to support ECE and CYW and EA in our area as well.
- Lack of subsidy, difficult to navigate the system, reaching families who do not qualify for subsidy - yet cannot afford licensed care.
- Needs to be a centralized focus.
- The biggest barriers are prohibitive cost for many parents, hours of operation don't suit many of the hours that our "working poor" parents endure, not enough infant care.
- Lack of access in rural communities and perceptions of school closures.
- Cost and location.
- Strengths: community-based, alignment across sectors. Barriers: transportation, availability for program due to staffing.
- Strengths include quality programming and care provided by childcare centres. Barriers include rural areas and cost prohibitive for some families.
- The strengths of the current system are that we have a vision moving forward to support families and we have been diligent in our pursuit of in-school integrated services that will support families in neighbourhoods.
- The system provides caring environments that promote healthy active learning for their young. The weakness is the accessibility to parents who cannot afford the daycare and those who are penalized because they can according to the government, afford it. Daycare is far too expensive for everyone.
- The retrofit funding by MOE in several of our schools has provided a very real and seamless service to families.
- A growing strength is the collaboration between our Board and the third party providers.

In your experience, what can be done by governments, communities, employers and providers to increase access to early years programs and licensed child care?

- Better funding is always an issue when talking about providing more spaces and support for young children and their families. We cannot open more spaces or provide more care if the funding is not present. Government needs to continue to support early years development and childcare as many families have both parents working outside of the home to provide for their families. It is essential to be acutely aware of the socio-economics of our region and the folks that are living here in order to provide the spaces and early years supports for young ones that is needed.
- Easier navigation of services, increased communication and awareness between service providers and government branches, ease and availability of funds for families to access affordable and high quality care.
- Provide funding fairness supporting rural communities
- Help with the cost, accessible day care. Living in the country means daycare spots aren't always easy to find or accessible.
- Increase the hours of before-and-after school care so that it can create a sustainable income for staff in rural areas. Affordable space to operate programs. Transportation support for lower income families in rural areas. Continuing to link services for one stop shopping for parents.
- Subsidies for low income families.
- Additional funding to municipalities to subsidize for low income families.
- Funding needs to come from government to ensure high level day care programs are available to all. They must provide better funding to ECE programs with more rigorous expectations of the applicant to the program and the student currently in the program.
- Funding is required to retrofit school buildings to meet the safety and regulatory needs for toddler programs. (i.e. secure access, modified washrooms, modified spaces, different lighting, accessibility, parking, closed play yards).

RESPONSIVENESS

Do parents have the early years and child care options they need?

- Yes, but wait times and availability can be a challenge in regards to young ones. Creating sustainable and viable licensed operations is challenging at times.
- Those who can afford it, and/or navigate the system do.
- Although the system has evolved to support parents it still needs further work.
- Not in rural areas - seems like there are not enough children needing care to make it viable for operators.
- Some do. It depends on the area. In rural areas, smaller communities often have limited access. It is difficult to staff before-and-after school programs in rural areas due to the hours (i.e., few hour split between morning and afternoon)
- There are a variety of available options - but mostly city-based.
- No, often we want more child cares in our country schools, but they cannot find staff to work at these schools...or the program becomes full and operators have to give the full time parents first choice at spaces. We need more OEYCFCs. Parents cannot get across town with strollers etc., on a bus, so many children can't access the available programs.
- Yes and no. Those who can afford the care usually are first to enroll. Not all early year centres are equal and some communities are lacking.
- The answer is a resounding “no” for many parts of our rural board. Distance, cost, location of care site versus parental work location and parental work hours are serious negative factors.

What are the strengths of the current system and options available? What could be done to provide families with more choice and flexibility?

- There are a few options for parents out there, but early registration is important. Some licensed childcare providers are challenged by the spaces for full-time vs part-time needs of families and having the appropriate timeslots for families that they need.
- Centralized funding from all sources attached to the Ministry of Education.
- What we offer is good, but we need more support for rural areas. Infant care is really needed!
- Inequity in options for families in rural communities - all families in Ontario should have supports regardless of location, farmers feed cities, yet how does a farming family access childcare?
- Variety of options in various locations - however mostly located in the city. More rural options needed.
- The OEYCFCs that are running in our board have excellent attendance and families that are able to access them love the programs. We have an excellent partnership with them. The programs have updated programming to the new curriculum...How Does Learning Happen? This has changed the environment in a positive way. The options available are good but limited. Providing child care and OEYCFCs in all schools, through DSSAB (third party operators) would make it accessible to all. Parents who do not qualify for subsidies feel child care is very expensive and often opt out for that reason.
- Cheaper affordable day care.
- Families should be given options for the type of care they hope to secure for their child. If they have a solid environment at home with a good caregiver, they should be given a tax break allowing for this option to be chosen. The current system doesn't acknowledge the lack of ECEs and training many of the current ones have to put into practice the promises of the new emergent curriculum. Daycares don't have adequate funding to support their continued education.
- Better deployment of existing and qualified staff.

AFFORDABILITY

What does an affordable child care system look like to you?

- Affordable childcare should be based on affordable living; it is going to be an ongoing challenge in Ontario, and within our most vulnerable populations as well as our middle class. People should not feel like they are working to solely pay for childcare, but to also better themselves and their families.
- Easy accessibility for all families.
- Based on a realistic funding formula on the ability to pay.
- Equal opportunities for children in areas of lower income, access for children of non-working parents - they need stimulation, no waitlists.
- No matter where a family lives in Ontario (urban/rural), they should have affordable access/options in the community where they live.
- Affordable means if a child is to have preschool experiences then the child should be able to attend child care and as a community, we need to support equitable outcomes for all. Everyone gets to go to OEYCFC and school, why not child care? Consider Finland's model: after the parental leave period, parents are entitled to place their child in public day care until the child starts school, usually at the age of seven.
- An affordable child care system takes into account all young families. There are far too many families who earn good money on paper who are struggling to have two of their children in daycare at one time. The expectations are tougher on them. All families should receive adequate breaks to ensure good solid care for their children.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the subsidy model in Ontario?

- Subsidy spaces are changing in our region by providing subsidized spaces within childcare facilities based on the clients not on the provider. This is a good change because families who are subsidized should not be limited in where they can go because the spaces allotted for this facility are already filled.
- Difficult to navigate.
- Subsidy process is tedious, often true needs are not readily visible, wrong questions are asked.
- City-centric. How does a farming family living in poverty access resources that are 30 kms from the family farm? How does a farm-hand and the family access childcare in a rural setting when the only school in 30 km is closing?
- Current model allows some low income families to access care. Additional subsidies are needed.

What are the most important things governments, communities, providers and employers should do to make early years programs in Ontario more affordable?

- Ontario should always be conscientious of families and their childcare and early year development that they need. We need our children to be supported and safe providing all the resources they need to lead successful young lives. Funding spaces and programs and staffing these providers with educated professionals is very important.
- Recognize that early years programs for children are essential for their education & for parents to provide flexibility in their working life.
- Work together to determine which families have financial needs, subsidize pay for ECE's.
- Further supports to rural schools and rural communities - through funding formula enhancements
- Increased funding for subsidies.
- Provide school boards with funding for space for child care so we can cut their expenses by not having to charge them for operational costs like space, custodial etc. Subsidies for all but still based on salary.

QUALITY

What does a high quality early years or child care program look like?

- High quality providers that use licensed professionals with great skills that support and draw from resources to provide an essential service to our young families and children.
- Staff have training, are engaged with children in the program. Differentiated activities for age, interest and development.
- A play based, differentiated program that reports regularly to parents and assists parent understanding about child development.
- Community directed, play-based learning.
- Well-equipped and resourced programs with capable staff that are able to engage students in active learning through play. 2. Flexible and able to respond to the schedules and needs of parents. 3. Programs that have the resources to address the needs of students with exceptionalities.
- Safe, nurturing environment supported by "How Does Learning Happen" document.
- A program where I am seeing programming based on How Does Learning Happen? and The Kindergarten Program document. Programs that have a safe and nurturing environment where children are seen as capable and competent.
- Great learning opportunities.
- High quality requires high quality in staffing and environment. It requires compassionate but educated early years teachers. It also requires a maximum of 15 children in the kindergarten program. If this is early years, then it needs to reconsider the congested classrooms many schools are forced to endure. Too many children are not served well even with a second adult in the classroom.
- It must be qualitative child-centered. Evidence must exist and be measured to ensure that the program experience adds to school program: self-care, independence, numeracy, literacy, play-based learning.

What role should the province play in ensuring high quality early learning and child care programs?

- The province should recognize that by supporting and funding quality childcare and early years learning is really supporting families and our economy. It is also promoting equality and levelling the playing field for all children in Ontario.
- Boards should be funded for personnel to oversee quality, and collaboratively provide training with providers.
- The province needs to hear the voices of the stakeholders (parents, staff).
- Funding formula enhancements that support rural communities.
- Funding. Monitoring for quality. Ensuring equity of access. Ensuring good spaces are provided and they are adequately staffed and resourced. Flexibility to allow for individual family preferences.
- Licensing directs safety measures. Whose responsibility is it to supervise the "quality" of programming?
- Provide funding for schools, child care and OEYCFCs to come together and set goals together for their programs. We have begun this journey, but boards have no dollars for release time for this.
- Provide affordable day care.
- More funding can support the changes at all levels. From the colleges training to the programs hiring and the environments housing our little ones, improvement needs to happen.
- Program standards

How should we measure quality in our early years and child care programs?

- Quality should be measured by the consent evaluation of programming and continued learning and strategizing of our professionals working in the field. Quality can be measured by the young children themselves moving forward into the public school system already tapped into the resources and educational pieces that they need to achieve, are engaged and are well.
- Centrally produced measurement tool that is applicable across programs and province.
- Involve supervisors - they are familiar with the family needs and programs - performance appraisals, parent surveys, ground-level quality control NOT top down - trust factor.
- Access and equities (urban and rural).
- Safety and quality of care measures through on ongoing inspections 2. Child developmental outcomes and benchmarks 3. Staff qualifications and performance 4. facility appropriateness
- Focus groups with families, accountability measures around program implementation, long range plans should reflect a solid program as well as documentation. Safety inspections where staff and families are involved.
- Talk to parents
- Supervision through regular visits from ministry representatives, expectation of practitioners to continue building their own professional practice, conversation with families can be a start,
- Quality indicators: EDI measurements, waitlists down, subsidy list down, participation/enrollment increased, possible quality ratings, gender-wage gaps lessened.
- Need research and data to measure quality.

OPSBA also asked about the government's fall announcement of the creation of 100,000 child care spaces across the province for infants, toddlers and preschoolers with some spaces being located in schools.

- Bringing childcare spaces into schools is a great way to repurpose under-utilized spaces and link the community and families with the school communities that they will be a part of for many years. Some of the challenges of course are meeting the standards in the spaces provided and having enough funding to make these spaces what they need to be. Being able to provide a viable operation and fill the spaces needed in rural and northern communities can be challenging at times too.
- Need to have separate entrances, and spaces need to be "lockable" from each other.
- Schools are closing; rooms are closing to save money - no storage for child care, lack of understanding from school staff, rental fees, and access for parents after hours (safe schools policies).
- When the only community school closes - or the "new" school is 30 km away - how does this enhance childcare?
- Ensuring boards have sufficient long-term funding to build, staff and support programs and facilities.
- Very happy to provide childcare space in schools where room is available. However, the board cannot incur additional costs to house childcare. These additional costs are then the responsibility of the childcare centre which potentially will increase fees to parents.
- Are there enough early childhood educators being turned out in the colleges to meet the demands
- Concerns lie with the lack of highly skilled ECEs about to graduate and soon to be enrolled to college programs. If you don't have enough educators to provide the service, it doesn't matter how many spaces you open up, it will be impossible to make it happen. In our schools, space is also a challenge since although we want to share with early years groups, we simply do not have the space.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide our feedback and comments regarding this next exciting phase for the early years and child care.

Sincerely,



Laurie French
President

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) represents public district school boards and public school authorities across Ontario. Together our members serve the educational needs of almost 70% of Ontario's elementary and secondary students. The Association advocates on behalf of the best interests and needs of the public school system in Ontario. OPSBA believes that the role of public education is to provide universally accessible education opportunities for all students regardless of their ethnic, racial or cultural backgrounds, social or economic status, individual exceptionality, or religious affiliation.