



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

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**OPSBA Submission to the Minister of Education's Consultation Document
Regarding Proposed Regulatory Amendments under the
Childcare and Early Years Act, 2014**

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback and commentary regarding these proposed amendments. It should be noted that our Association has always advocated for high quality, affordable and accessible programs for children and their families. Now, more than ever, given these unusual and uncertain times due to COVID-19, childcare is foundational to our economy and a vital service for many families. That said, a lack of childcare options has disproportionately affected women's participation in the workforce.

OPSBA believes, as many stakeholders do, that this is not the time to make any large-scale changes to childcare. The system is currently struggling with the realities of the pandemic – including keeping children safe while their parents are at work, providing steady employment to a marginalized work force, and keeping centres economically viable. There will be valuable learning from these COVID-19 related experiences that should be identified and discussed in order to inform policies and practices for the future.

Our schools are maintaining successful partnerships with their local community providers, including licensed childcare, whose presence is in more than half of our schools. Our schools are also the site for many before-and-after school care options and we continue to support our member boards having the flexibility to make local decisions that make sense for their communities.

These childcare options require a system to be flexible and responsive to parents' needs by allowing them options that fit their family circumstances. Notwithstanding this particular consultation, significant issues remain: the lack of affordable childcare spaces, high fees for parents, and pay inequities among childcare staff.

There are many proposed changes contemplated in this consultation document with some directed exclusively at the operations of childcare and home care settings, and others that are

technical or housekeeping in nature. We have discussed and shared this with the trustees who comprise OPSBA's consultative work teams, as well as senior school board staff responsible for the early years portfolio. We have provided commentary on the changes that impact school age children and areas of common interest to childcare and schools. We recommend the Ministry of Education strongly consider the advice given from the childcare sector and those individuals who are on the front line working directly with children.

Proposed Regulatory Amendments

Schedule 2 – Requirements for Age Groupings, Ratios, Maximum Group Size, and Proportion of Qualified Staff / Qualification Requirements

OPSBA shares the widespread concern for changes that would have less qualified staff responsible for more children, especially those in younger age categories. We believe that quality of care suffers without quality staff and this must not be compromised. Any changes being contemplated should consider the importance of adequate staffing ratios to ensure the health and safety of all children as well as the significant range of developmental needs and abilities of children. Increasing the accessibility and affordability of childcare should not be achieved at the expense of qualified staff and increased ratios.

Our members did ask what prompted the consideration for these amendments and suggest that any changes to childcare be built on the premise that they would improve the quality of care provided to children as demonstrated by evidence-based research and other credible sources.

With regard to staff qualifications, there is an overall shortage of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs). Many childcare stakeholders have indicated there is simply not enough trained staff in childcare centres with early childhood development and critical pedagogical background. The concerns expressed about a decrease in qualified staff extends to taking childcare "back in time" and not building on the successful gains made in early years development (i.e. the *How Does Learning Happen?* pedagogical and program resource.)

The Ministry of Education needs to resume its work regarding the [Workforce Study for Early Years and Childcare Employees](#) with a plan to attract and retain individuals in the ECE profession.

Authorized Recreational and Skill Build Programs

The proposed change would allow specific Authorized Recreational and Skill Building Programs to operate for more than three consecutive hours, which is their current limit. In the past we have supported expanding the list of operators providing before-and-after school care to provide options that fit children and family circumstances. Concerns were expressed about program quality assurance, variance of costs and possible confusion around multiple programs within one school. For programs that were located off-site, issues included safety, supervision, program consistency, transportation and the practical considerations for families with children in different programs.

OPSBA supports equity of access and opportunity for families but we do want to flag a concern regarding multiple operators within one school who may compete for childcare services where the lower cost option was the determining factor for a family. Multiple programs in a single site have also created inequities in family subsidies if one program includes a subsidy and the other does not. This issue continues to result in conflicting opinions of support:

Supportive:

- The extension may be beneficial to those areas with limited operators, mostly found in our rural and northern areas. It was noted that authorized recreational programs are providing an additional layer of care
- These programs are currently able to run for a full day for both Kindergarten and school-aged children on non-instructional days. It would seem reasonable to allow them to offer a program longer than three hours per day (prior to school and after school), as long as the quality of the program and staff are not compromised, and there are regulations and guidelines followed.
- Allowing specific Authorized Recreational and Skill Building programs to operate beyond three consecutive hours allows them to meet the care needs for parents who require before-and-after care, or care beyond the permitted three hours.

Non-Supportive:

- These programs play a role in the community but should not be considered a complement to childcare programs as they will not have the same oversight or accountability. This will result in more children entrusted to care by unqualified staff, which could cause a higher risk for children.
- This will also create a two-tier system for children and families. Recreation programs do not have the same fees due to requirements of qualified staff and legislative obligations. There will be licensed and board-operated programs in competition with recreational programs for registrants. Families may be left to themselves to figure out the differences in an already complicated system.

OPSBA suggests that if the Ministry of Education proceeds with the introduction of more than three consecutive hours of operation for a select group of providers, then perhaps this could be launched using pilot sites for a period of time with an opportunity to debrief with stakeholders before this is a permanent change.

Programs Offering Non-Standard Hours of Care

Overwhelmingly, trustees and senior board staff agreed there is a need to have licensed childcare operating during non-standard hours, including earlier and later on weekdays and even weekends. In some cases families are choosing unlicensed home childcare because of their early or late work hours or they are driving a great distance to work, which requires them to drop off or pick up children before other centres or the before-and-after school programs are open.

OPSBA would support a regulation to define “extended hours” that follows and supports the policy, safety and health obligations required for regular hours. As well, requirements should be in place to follow the same ratios of children and qualified staff.

OPSBA requests that if this was to include childcare located within schools that further consultation be done with the education sector. School-based options may result in additional custodial services and costs and extended health and safety measures (i.e. specified entrances, water flushing, snow clearing etc.)

Discussion Question #1: Forest/Outdoor Programs

Many school boards have a number of classrooms (many Kindergarten) that currently operate large parts of their day or program outdoors. This has been encouraged as part of the Kindergarten program and is reflected in the Ministry of Education's outdoor learning documents.

We also know that this fall, many elementary and secondary classrooms have tried to use outdoor space as much as possible due to COVID-19 concerns. Extending this to childcare was generally supported with the following comments:

- These are valuable learning experiences for children, particularly for those children who might not have outdoor access or opportunities,
- This supports the Indigenous concept of land-based learning.
- Continued and additional funding for outdoor learning opportunities would be required.
- These programs need to be licenced.

The research is overwhelming that outdoor programs/learning opportunities are beneficial to children's learning, development and well-being. Given the many documented benefits of outdoor programming for students, school boards would try to support this initiative and explore ways to combine this with current outdoor facilities and programs typically offered to students (e.g., Outdoor Education Centres, OPAL/Outdoor Play and Learning, etc.). Boards have suggested inviting interested operators to attend board-supported professional learning around outdoor learning.

It was also suggested to review other programs in Canada (e.g. Vancouver) and other countries where this has been done successfully.

Discussion Question #2: Registry of Unlicensed Childcare Providers

There was mixed support for this approach and a significant caution identified. The most substantial concern was that a government registry would suggest to parents that these unlicensed providers have some sort of government support and imply that there was a provincial approval process and public oversight. This could give parents a false sense of security.

Some stakeholders stated that all childcare should be licensed – including those currently not and home childcare providers.

There was some support indicating that a registry would be helpful and appreciated by parents. Currently, communities and schools have developed networks for parents to find unlicensed care, if that is their preference. In those cases it is clear that parents need to make their own evaluation regarding safety. Given that unlicensed childcare will surely always exist, a registry could be helpful for both monitoring and providing support that benefits children. It could be an opportunity to share information that describes the regulations related to licensed childcare and what it means to be unlicensed so parents are making a clearly informed decision. It would ensure that unlicensed childcare providers are more accountable and transparent.

Another opportunity would be a way to identify unlicensed providers and make access to training and supports a requirement, especially in the areas of health and safety and best practices when working with young children.

Discussion Question #3: Overlapping Age Boundaries for Licensed Age Groups/Categories

It was generally agreed that these additional options for age grouping would be helpful and perhaps more relevant in some areas compared to others. It may also make more centres viable but staff would have also increased responsibilities with different age groups. It would be important to ensure that quality of program and supervision and care of younger students not be compromised by this flexibility. Additionally, health and safety measures should not be compromised and the developmental needs of the children must be taken into consideration when grouping younger children with older children and vice versa. This overlapping is also good for child development between the ages – self-regulation, empathy, language etc.

Other considerations would be clarification of fees, as childcare program fees decrease when children move from younger to older age groups (and higher ratios) and appropriate classroom spaces.

OPPSBA supports provincial and federal government investments in a universal childcare program that provides equity of access and opportunity for all children and youth. This type of program not only supports the economy, but provides an important strategy to improve the social determinants of health, school readiness and ultimately success for all children both in school and in life.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sincerely,



Cathy Abraham
President
Ontario Public School Boards' Association

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association represents English public district school boards and public school authorities across Ontario, which together serve more than 1.3 million public elementary and secondary students. The Association advocates on behalf of the best interests and needs of the public school system in Ontario. OPSBA is seen as the credible voice of public education in Ontario and is routinely called on by the provincial government for input and advice on legislation and the impact of government policy directions