

POLICY MONITOR #1

A response to the Government of Ontario on the Best Start Child and Family Centre Consultation

If there was one thing the government could do right now for children and families in Ontario, what could that be? For several decades we have complained about the lack of affordable and high quality child care, the long wait lists for subsidies, the lack of programs for children with special needs and the broken patchwork of services we do offer.

We have an opportunity to build a foundation for services for children and their families – but that means making a radical move toward something different and innovative. It means moving away from the rhetoric of business as usual, working within the silos that fit like an old sweater but are starting to smell a little mouldy.

This is what the government can do; create a mandate for the municipalities to take a lead on being the service system managers for Best Start Child and Family Centres. Direct local leaders to work with school boards to design a system that meets the needs of all families. Move toward a universal design, like education and health care, so that no matter where you live or how much your family earns or how many siblings you have, every child will be able to access services over time.

Of course, nothing happens overnight and the *With Our Best Future in Mind* report to the Premier assumes that it will take time.

The report recommends a leadership role for the municipal government, because it is democratically elected and responsive to its citizens. Most municipal governments have an infrastructure in place that includes competent staff who understands systems. Municipalities have the capacity to move us from the current dysfunctional delivery of services toward a system that will enable more children and their families a right to services.

A move toward a comprehensive child and family service system will provide seamless access to more early learning and care programs, better services for pre- and post-natal care, improved supports for children with special needs and significantly better resources for family supports. A child and family service system that works for families requires leadership from local government. Nobody is interested in a “big government” approach to early learning and family support programs that creates monolithic institutions. We need governance that can respond to local realities. We need elected local government to take and share a leadership role that works in partnership with community organizations. The development of universal health care and universal education was not created by small-scale organizations. It was created under the leadership of governments and its successful implementation can be evaluated on the simple fact that every child in Ontario that needs health care and is ready to participate in education, can. We can do the same for children and their families before they start school.