

Finishing the Best Start vision in Ontario: A response to Ontario's early years consultation

The Ontario Ministry of Education has begun a conversation on a new early years strategy with an online consultation at <https://www.ontario.ca/page/consultation-early-years-and-child-care-strategy>

Ontario's early years vision is rooted in the 2005 Best Start Initiative and the more recent Early Years Policy Framework. With the 2009 report "With our best future in mind" the government began an ambitious transformation of early learning and care services. The first phase of transformation was concentrated on children 4 to 12 years of age. With a clear mandate embedded in legislation, the introduction of full day kindergarten and extended day programming addressed the early learning needs of over 250,000, 4 and 5 year olds. Expanding the mandate to provide before and after school programming for children 6 to 12 years old is another mechanism to increase more programming for children. In Toronto alone it means 15,194 more children are enrolled in after school care.

The Provincial announcement of an additional 100,000 new child care spaces begins phase 2, addressing the needs of families with children from birth to kindergarten. This new commitment also offers opportunities to leverage the Federal Early Learning Framework. Within this context it is important to develop a comprehensive plan for Ontario that is inclusive of all families, addresses issues of affordability for parents and supports service stability and planned growth.

Despite efforts to improve staff wages and stabilize programming, barriers to access for Ontario's youngest children persist. Toronto Children's Services' [Demand Study](#) quantifies the strong correlation between affordability and access. It identifies the risk of expansion without addressing affordability. In the current context, new spaces without addressing affordability will only result in empty spaces.

The Atkinson Centre offers the following proposals in response to these realities. They are designed to promote inclusive access and to create a stable, coherent base to grow quality services.

➤ **Develop a new funding approach to provide 2 to 4 year olds with 15 hours a week of preschool programming.**

Continue to build on the directions of the Provincial Best Start initiative, by offering 15 hours a week of preschool programming to children 2 – 4 years old at no cost to families. This is the next continuum of providing all children with the opportunities for positive healthy development and complements the province's Poverty Reduction Strategy. The new age groupings in the EYCC Act are suited to further exploration and research of the impact on access and positive outcomes for children and families. Programming could be delivered within existing early years facilities (child

care, nursery schools, OEYCs, FRCPs) and would apply to all families, opening access to children now excluded and reducing costs for parents requiring longer hours to support their workforce participation.

- **Modernize/reform/update eligibility criteria for child care fee subsidy by removing "activity" requirements**

While the 2005 change from needs to income testing was a positive step, further change is needed. Removing the "activity" requirement to work or study as an access point for fee subsidy would support the most vulnerable children who are denied an early education or who cycle in and out of child care programs in tandem with their parents employment.

- **Change the Education Act to enshrine a requirement to ensure that community schools are configured to accommodate services for the younger children.**

Build on the Schools First policy. We have seen through the recent legislative changes how a clear mandate embedded in legislation results in transformational change. This change advances the relationship between school boards and child care under the Ministry of Education. We continue to hear of the barriers from both service providers and school boards of the difficulty they face based on historic funding relationships. This will also require changes to the accommodation formula and reviews. As we move forward space planning should consider forecasted changes in the child population past the 5-year horizons.

- **Provide Municipal flexibility to address affordability and capacity in a planned approach**

Investments in expanding both capacity and affordability must go hand-in-hand. Each municipality needs the flexibility to plan the right balance based on local circumstances between increasing access through capital and increasing access through operating/subsidy. Allowing for a phased approach provides the flexibility to change based on changing circumstances from year to year.

- **Develop a strategy for meaningful parental leave, both in length and level of income.**

Canada's parental leave policies are in need of reform. We recommend a made-in-Ontario parental leave policy that increases access to this vital program for families by providing more flexibility, changing eligibility criteria, and adjusting minimum and maximum payments. This will help decrease the pressure on infant care, and open up spaces for vulnerable families without access to paid leave. As with pension reform, Ontario is well placed to take a leadership role to modernize social policy for today's families.