

## Recommendations for the future administration of the EDI in Ontario

February 7, 2013

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### Introduction

The Ontario Government has undertaken a review of the administration of the Early Development Instrument (EDI), including how data are collected, analyzed and reported. An external consulting firm, Malatest & Associates, conducted the review with a final report due in December 2012.

The purpose of this paper is not to inform the consultant's work but to use the occasion of a review to broaden the discussion about the EDI. Our interest lies in maximizing its benefits. Only by understanding the critical underlying principles of the EDI can we then address the issue of its administration.

This paper is informed by a November 2012 roundtable discussion hosted by the Atkinson Centre at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and attended by stakeholders who use the EDI in planning, research and community mobilization. It also benefits from discussions with Cathie Nolan, the Australian EDI Project Manager of the Department of Education in Victoria, Australia.

*The most important use of the EDI is for the evaluation and improved development of public policy, programs and funding initiatives that support children and families in their communities.*

The EDI must fit into a wider context of public policy. EDI is a measurement of children's "readiness" for school, but the subsets of child outcomes are much more than the results of classroom activities. Yes, good kindergarten experiences are important in shaping children's outcomes, and have an impact on "readiness to learn." However, children's experiences in the years before they enter school are often as, or, many would argue, more important than what happens in the junior and senior kindergarten classroom. Thus, the task of improving school readiness in particular, and child outcomes in general, must ultimately be carried out on a bigger field.

While the kindergarten classroom is where the data are collected, this should not distract from the goal of the EDI. EDI data, when aggregated, indicate the many factors that influence children's development. This raises our awareness of the broader political, social, cultural and geographical environments where children live and help us to move away from holding the family (or kindergarten) solely responsible.

The EDI can be used both retrospectively, as a reflection of the first five years of life (early childhood outcomes), and prospectively, as a forecast of future outcomes in school and life (school readiness). It provides the evidence for what needs to be done to ensure the *next* cohorts of children are able to achieve the outcomes they are entitled to as citizens. In short, the most important use of the EDI is for the evaluation and improved development of public policy, programs and funding initiatives that support children and their families.

## **EDI in Ontario**

The EDI is a validated and respected tool, used widely across Canada and abroad. In international jurisdictions, such as Australia, the EDI is used on national, regional and local levels in the evaluation and development of policy and programs. An argument can be made that for a number of structural and policy reasons Ontario actually *fails* to fully exploit the potential of the EDI, despite its visionary involvement in its early implementation.

An inherent problem in the original design of EDI implementation was the vision of activating “community” involvement on behalf of children. It was assumed that EDI results fed back to communities would make them aware of the status of their children and allow them to respond in an informed manner. Many jurisdictions provided seed funding to foster community tables.

However, presenting communities with problems they have no power to address can be demobilizing.

Local coalitions of services providers and activists lack the authority to alter the funding constraints and program rules that make it difficult to adapt programs based on EDI results. When funding ends coalitions become difficult to sustain.

Presented appropriately the EDI focuses the importance of an integrated, universal approach to child wellbeing. Unfortunately, too often EDI results have served as a vehicle for service providers to focus on a specific developmental domain or even a part thereof. The data have been used in a narrow way to, for example, emphasize the need for family resource programs with the intent to improve parenting or develop strategies for specific child skills such as literacy. This narrow application of the EDI ultimately diminishes the wider community advancement perspective, losing it in a host of targeted, often one-off, initiatives.

## **The EDI – A made-in-Canada instrument**

The process of development of the EDI began in 1998 in Hamilton, Ontario at McMaster University, under the leadership of Dr. Dan Offord, with an advisory board lead by Dr. Fraser Mustard. The EDI was finalized in 2000 in Ontario and has since become a population-level research tool utilized to various degrees across Canada and in 12 other countries.

The EDI can...

- Report on populations of children in different communities
- Monitor populations of children over time
- Predict how children will do in elementary school

The EDI cannot...

- Provide a clinical diagnosis

The Offord Centre for Child Studies (OCCS) led by Dr. Magdalena Janus, owns the EDI, licenses its use and maintains a repository of results to monitor national and international norms. The Forum on Early Child Development Monitoring encourages and supports the pan-Canadian use of the EDI. Complete pan-Canadian coverage would enable an understanding of broad trends across the country and contribute to a national message about the importance of early child development.

For additional analysis please see:

[http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/Events/2013\\_Events/EDI\\_Data\\_to\\_Action.html](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/Events/2013_Events/EDI_Data_to_Action.html)

The initial implementation also dismissed an essential partner—regional governments (Consolidated Municipal Service Managers, CMSM) who have the primary responsibility for the planning and management of services for young children and families. Indeed, the design ignored the municipal role as the basic community building block. The administration of the EDI was entrusted to Data Analysis Coordinators (DACs)—one for each provincial electoral riding—associated with Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYCs). The OEYCs are directly funded by the Ministry of Children and Youth and, in most communities, remain outside municipal children’s service planning and management responsibilities.

Leadership regarding the EDI makes an important difference in how embedded the data are in community planning processes. Case in point, communities—countries even—that have experienced the greatest success in incorporating EDI findings into effective policies and programs for children are those where school superintendents, public health officials and municipal administrators have become leaders and directed the use of the data to raise the health and wellbeing of young children in their jurisdictions.

***1. The first priority is for the EDI to be integrated into provincial policy and program development. After an initial processing of the EDI surveys by the Offord Centre, the data should be forwarded to a provincial coordinating authority and to the appropriate regional authorities.***

In order to move forward, it is important that the EDI be better utilized at the provincial level. Through its “Healthy Child Manitoba” strategy, Manitoba provides an example of a cross-departmental approach to research, policy development and the evaluation of initiatives for improving outcomes for all children and communities; the EDI and linking of data from various provincial databases are at the core of this strategy.

The opportunity to link EDI data to other provincial databases such as the EQAO<sup>1</sup> and Ontario-wide public health data would permit a long-term evaluation of child outcomes. Creating a provincial body to inform policy development and evaluation across government ministries and repurposing the DAC functions within municipal program and planning processes would also help resolve issues related to coherence and quality of the work that is performed by DACs across the province that is mostly attributed to their fragmented supervision.

The *Early Years Policy Framework* released in January 2013 indicates that EDI responsibility will move to the Ministry of Education from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) along with the oversight of family support programs. This provides an opportune time to rethink its functions.

***2. EDI data should be delivered from the Offord Centre to appropriate municipal authorities with a renewed mandate specifying the responsibility for local analysis, program evaluation and service planning. The success of this would depend on municipalities being given the resources required to analyze and make the EDI results publicly available. Municipalities would also be required to take the lead in the development of local service plans that meet a***

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<sup>1</sup> The Education Quality and Accountability Office is an arms-length government body responsible for Ontario-wide assessment of children’s literacy and numeracy achievements.

*wider provincial policy framework. The municipal coordination role includes the building and maintenance of partnerships with the education and public health sector as well promoting community engagement in service planning processes.*

**3. *Responsibility for functions currently carried out by Data Analysis Coordinators should be transferred to municipalities.***

Municipal service management of child care and other social services is unique within the Canadian context and presents an ideal opportunity for integration of programs that support young children and families. However, when the system management role is fractured through ad hoc, outdated arrangements, the ability to use the EDI in comprehensive policy and program development is severely compromised. The ability to integrate administrative databases with the EDI is also especially critical in communities with high rates of mobility that interfere with the reliable use of data collected in non-census years. In such communities, administrative data for services such as child care, social assistance and housing can be used as proxies for monitoring changes during inter-census periods and can provide an equally suitable basis for program development and evaluation.

Moving—and embedding the DAC responsibilities in existing research, planning and monitoring functions that require close and continued collaboration with public health and the school boards—to municipalities will also make it more possible to combine administrative databases into a powerful tool for more effective children’s programming at the local level.

Where municipal authorities are unable to fulfill this role the province should provide alternative means.

**4. *EDI data should be capable of being merged with administrative databases maintained by municipalities in their capacity as provincially mandated managers of services supporting children and families.***

A common application of the EDI is to map the results by neighbourhood, showing the incidence of children who are at risk of developmental delay combined with SES indicators. The information is often presented in this way with the intent of generating public reaction leading to advocacy and to the creation of specific programs that will reduce the incidence of vulnerable children. Situating the EDI analysis at the municipal level with strong connections to public health and education will help to elevate the application of findings to wider-reaching activities and services and may shift the focus of the EDI away from risk factors and children’s vulnerabilities.

Ideally, rather than focusing on children and neighbourhoods at risk, EDI findings would be better deployed in an integrated plan that includes other benchmarks for equitable outcomes for all children. The common objectives of the integrated plan could then be subscribed to by government and community partners in a way that allows for clearer goals, action towards common goals and budgetary measures required to achieve the goals.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> An example of such approach is the 2005 initiative by City of Toronto Council that approved the use of 80<sup>th</sup> percentile EDI scores as first of a series of benchmarks developed under the *Best Generation Yet* action plan. Individual City departments including Public Health were directed to develop multi-year implementation plans accompanied by full costing and budget allocations.

The underlying principle being that, while all children and families require some level of support, some communities may require more intensive supports than others. In practical terms, the question becomes, “what do we need to do to achieve best possible outcomes for all children in any given community?” as opposed to only attempting to reduce levels of vulnerability of some children to more tolerable levels.

This change in focus would also aid in avoiding the already mentioned EDI interpretation problems including over-emphasis on individual developmental domains. This is especially serious when “at risk” labels are being applied to neighbourhoods with a high proportion of young children whose first language is neither English nor French as well as children from minority cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Although “norming” of the data is important on the provincial level, in many jurisdictions that experience high immigration and population turnover, norming on the municipal level can make a significant contribution to better service planning and management.

***5. In recognition of recent changes in the delivery and staffing of kindergarten programs, the province should pilot using Early Childhood Educators to administer the EDI.***

The accuracy of the EDI assessment depends on several factors, not in the least the administering teachers’ educational background and age, as well as classroom characteristics.<sup>3</sup> Although pre-administration training is available for teachers, factors such as release time to complete the survey instrument and classroom size contribute to the accuracy of the findings. Given that less than one third of Ontario’s kindergarten teachers have a background in child development it is appropriate to investigate an alternative method of administering EDI. With the full implementation of full day kindergarten in 2014, the province should take advantage of fully trained Early Childhood Educators in every kindergarten classroom. Without any prejudice to the independent need for paid program planning time for ECEs in kindergarten classrooms, assigning the responsibility for administration of EDI to ECE staff would increase the accuracy of the survey while reducing costs for those jurisdictions that provide release time to teachers to fill out the survey.

***6. To promote better utilization and to accommodate needs of communities undergoing rapid change, EDI surveys should be administered more often where warranted.***

Ontario uses a three-year EDI implementation cycle; Manitoba and British Columbia use two-year cycles. In areas that experience high levels of immigration or population turnover due to economic or urban renewal and growth, the three-year gap in information is a major drawback. Increasing the frequency of the EDI would provide impetus to increase the stake that school boards have in the administration of the EDI and the use of EDI findings. The cost of the EDI is relatively minor given the potential benefits and the annual costs currently associated with the DACs.

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<sup>3</sup> Forer, B. A. (2009). *Validation of multilevel constructs: Methods and empirical findings for the Early Development Instrument*. (PhD Thesis, University of British Columbia). Retrieved December 2012, from <https://circle.ubc.ca/handle/2429/13401>

**7. *EDI collection should be implemented in the same calendar year for coterminous school boards.***

The implementation and analysis of the EDI also suffers from the existence of four different education authorities in each geographical area, often with different boundaries. Further confounding the problem is the practice of EDI surveys in different school boards serving the same geographic area not being administered in the same years.

**8. *The provincial government should introduce a companion instrument to be administered at the beginning of Junior Kindergarten; this will provide a valuable and timely assessment of supports that children aged 0-3 and their families need to thrive in their communities. It will also help in assessing the school's performance over the two years of kindergarten.***

Full day kindergarten also presents an opportunity to introduce a companion instrument at children's entry into junior kindergarten. In fact, during the early days of the EDI some school boards administered the instrument to JK students (soon after the beginning of the school year).

**Conclusion**

The EDI is potentially a very valuable tool whose usefulness has been demonstrated in other provinces across Canada and many countries abroad. In Ontario there are specific challenges that need to be overcome in order to maximize the potential of EDI; the recommendations in this submission have been crafted with this goal in mind.

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For more information on this topic, as well as about the Atkinson Centre, please visit: [www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson)