

Waterloo's Story: Implementing a Comprehensive Vision for Seamless Care

Ontario's implementation of the bold vision for school board operated seamless child care across Ontario that was described in, *With Our Best Future In Mind*¹, has hit a few road blocks. After a great deal of lobbying, some general election politicking, and resulting legislative changes, today, most school boards in Ontario have reverted to the status quo in terms of how before and after school programs are delivered. In the majority of school boards before and after care programs are delivered by a third-party agency resulting in access to service that ranges from comprehensive to skeletal. The exception to this pattern exists in Waterloo, Ontario.

Today in Waterloo Region, the school boards are the largest operator of before and after school programs, access to school age child care is rapidly expanding, and parent fees have been reduced in each of the three years that the school board has operated programs. This begs the question, then, "What happened in Waterloo Region that allowed school boards to "follow through" with the vision described by Dr. Pascal?"

It was clear, even prior to the announcement of the Ontario government's plan to operate Full-Day Kindergarten and board-operated extended day programs, that Waterloo Region suffered from a significant shortage of accessible, high-quality programs for young children. While some third party providers were offering services in the Region, there were significant gaps and needs across the system, mainly in communities that reflected lower socio-economic status. For this reason the school board was "called to action". Clearly, if school boards were to meet the intended long-term outcomes of full day early learning, we needed to embrace the vision of the Pascal report and move away from the historically piecemeal and patchwork approach to child-care in our community. Waterloo became determined to participate, as full partners, in the delivery of high quality early learning programs.

To that end, the Waterloo Region District School Board established an effective infrastructure by forming an Early Years Task Force. This task force brought together business, planning, facilities, human resources, and program staff within the board and also included staff from the Region of Waterloo Children's Services division. To provide leadership, realignment of an existing staff position within the board occurred to hire a System Administrator of Early Learning to ensure there was internal capacity to follow through on initiatives and provide leadership across the system with key aspects of implementation. Trustees were also regularly updated and engaged in our broader vision and informed of implementation status on a regular basis. Early learning supervisors were added to the team.

The Waterloo Region District School Board, with the support of our regional partners, began to operate before and after school programs for children ages four to seven in four schools in 2010-2011 serving around 80 students in the first year of Full Day Kindergarten. The Region of Waterloo partnered with the Board to administer the billing, fee collection and seamless handling of all child-

¹ Pascal, C. (2009). *With our best future in mind: Implementing early learning in Ontario*. Report to the Premier of Ontario.

care subsidy. Year two of Full Day Kindergarten saw programs expand to eight school sites serving 200 families. This year, 2012-2013, in the third year of Full Day Kindergarten Implementation, there are 32 programs serving approximately 1600 families, and this represents only 49% implementation of Full-Day Kindergarten. We anticipate doubling this number by the time the program is fully implemented.

The Board and Region had a belief in the vision “if we build it, they will come”...families have overwhelmingly responded. The success and growth of the programs have necessitated the hiring of two Early Childhood Educator Supervisors to continue to support the program quality and management of the programs while also supporting Principals with implementation. Helping school-based staff see the value of the programs, and not over-whelm them with details has made the process of implementation more effective.

However, the road has not been an easy one. Issues around supply DECE deployment, staffing ratios, communication with parents and program registration logistics have all stretched the capacity of the school board staff. Relations with third party child care operators and their parents were strained as a very intense and public debate ensued over the merits of Pascal’s vision. Through collective effort, compromises were made and parents have come out ahead as all programs in the Waterloo Region District School Board feature common hours, flexible enrollment, access to quality spaces with no waiting lists. In the end, no challenge has trumped the benefits of offering readily accessible, seamless care for families.

The Road to Seamless Child Care

Implementation Successes	Implementation Challenges
Built a common vision through the entire organization	Relationships with Third Party Childcare operators strained
Strong partnership with our Municipal Partners (CMSM)	Logistics of sharing space within schools
Schools viewed more as community hubs/Extended day and FDK are seamless	Rapid expansion of programs taxes resources
Improved access to care for families (1000 more families and counting)	DECE supply deployment challenges
Improved engagement with families at the school and system level	Funding of System Administrator role not funded by Ministry of Education
Costs reduced as economies of scale achieved	Professional Development models need to be re-examined for ECE staff working from 7:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m.
All children in fully equipped, appropriate spaces (no more gym stages, work areas)	
Able to successfully operate at cost recovery basis	
Improved policies for parents (flexible enrollment, no wait lists, no deposits)	
Quality program management	

For more information, please visit <http://www.wrdsb.ca/>

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