

Work Progresses on Ontario's Early Years Puzzle

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By Kerry McCuaig

The task of creating coherence out of the province's early years services took a step forward on January 23, 2013 with the release of the *Ontario Early Years Policy Framework*. It's not the kind of document that gets media attention or stirs attention deep in the sector. The framework is about governance and while that isn't as exciting as money or legislative change it is an essential forerunner if the latter are to be accomplished effectively.

First, the proposal moves fully funded programs to the Ministry of Education. Ontario Early Years Centres migrate from the Ministry of the Children and Youth Services. These will combine with Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, Family Resources Centres and Better Beginnings Better Future sites under a single mandate and brand—Best Start Child and Family Centres. This should involve more than new signage. From the parents' perspective being able to identify a community service and know what to expect when they enter the door breaks down access barriers. Inside each BS Centre families can expect to find similar programs and supports provided by qualified staff guided by a common approach to early learning.

The document also promises expanded resources and supports through a provincial website. If this created one great online resource rather than hundreds of okay ones it would be an accomplishment. Australia's official site for parents is a good example with chat rooms, and timely multimedia resources <http://raisingchildren.net.au>.

If the above all transpires by the 2014 deadline, Ontario will actually have an integrated family support program.

Responsibility for the Early Development Instrument (EDI) also moves to Education along with the Data Analysis Coordinators (DACs). The EDI is an important planning and accountability tool and should reside with the ministry leading early years programming. Yet to be determined is whether the DAC functions will move to municipalities. They might; the document signals greater local management authority for municipalities.

The document is right to recognize the leadership being shown by the French language school boards to integrate and expand access to early learning and care. Credit is also due to the province for its efforts to collaborate with First Nations and Aboriginal peoples to improve programming on and off reserves.

The framework is more ambiguous in other areas. It acknowledges the problems emanating from the many players involved in Preschool Speech and Language but leaves it to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to reengineer the quagmire.

Child care will have to wait for the legislative changes that could help it weather the transition to full day kindergarten. Despite the interlocking puzzle motif depicted in the document, much more will need to happen in the way of funding reform if child care is to join up with its fully funded early years cousins.

A missing piece is public health. It needs to be a visible partner with municipalities in program planning and delivery so Best Start Centres are connected to Healthy Babies Healthy Children and other family health programs. Public health also provides an important accountability element, accommodating the inking of data from prenatal and birth through to school.

A very positive signal in the report is the intention to keep the full day kindergarten rollout on track for 2014. Also promising are commitments to develop a common program guide for all early years settings and to improve access for children with different abilities.

Next steps: Naturally service providers will be asking what all this means for them. Timely direction will relieve some angst in the already angst filled sector.

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Figure 1. Image taken from *Ontario Early Years Policy Framework* document (2013)

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