

Response to the Ontario Ministry of Education's
consultation on child care and early years strategy

Childcare Resource and Research Unit
225 Brunswick Avenue
Toronto, Ontario M5R 1P3
www.childcarecanada.org

December 31, 2016

Summary

The Childcare Resource and Research Unit applauds the Ontario government's intent to expand regulated child care in Ontario and the substantial financial commitment it has made. CRRU recognizes that the success of this initiative requires, at a minimum, resolution of a number of systemic roadblocks that will impede expansion of accessible, high quality, responsive, affordable child care. These are:

- Difficulty recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of skilled professional early childhood educators and the links between this and ECE's poor wages and working conditions;
- Need for new spaces to be affordable;
- Unaffordability of existing spaces;
- Limited supply of quality physical facilities to house new centre spaces;
- Governance issues including a) limited capacity of non-profit service providers to assume additional responsibility without sustainability; b) diminished supply of and support for publicly-delivered child care; and c) good evidence that expansion in the poorer quality, less efficient for-profit sector will not make a positive contribution to the high quality, accessible, affordable and responsive child care described in the provincial government's four pillars.

Additional issues to be addressed as part achieving accessibility, responsiveness to families, affordability and quality of child care and other early years programs include:

- Full inclusion of children with disabilities;
- Enhancement of off- and on-reserve child care and other early years programs for and by Indigenous communities;
- Need for timely assessment and adjustment of full-day kindergarten programs to ensure that they are making the best possible contribution to a modernized, responsive, accessible, high quality child care and early years system.

Overall, Ontario needs to move child care out of the failed market model into a more publicly planned, managed and funded system. CRRU argues that in addition to addressing immediate roadblocks to smooth the expansion initiative, a fuller more robust policy framework is needed over the medium to long-term. Thus, we urge the provincial government to undertake two linked tasks:

- develop a plan for expanding the supply of affordable, responsive, high quality child care, as committed, and
- embark on a full policy process to develop a robust, comprehensive ("modernized") policy framework that lays out short and long-term plans. This should include a clear vision for an integrated system of child care and other early years programs, principles and rationales including details to ensure effective operationalization, plans for long-term sustained funding and effective evaluation mechanisms.

About the Childcare Resource and Research Unit

The Toronto-based Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) has been a key actor in Canadian child care for four decades. First funded by the Ontario government in 1982 and by the federal government until 2007, the independent policy research institute is a main convener of knowledge, information and resources about ECEC research and policy. Together with cross-Canada partners, CRRU has been instrumental in ensuring that ECEC remains on the public policy agenda, that advocates and policy makers are empowered by knowledge, and that policy initiatives are informed by a wide variety of information. One of CRRU's basic operating premises has been that good public policy is based on solid information that draws on multi-disciplinary research and policy analysis.

Context

In 2011, the Ontario government made a commitment to “modernize Ontario’s child care system”. Since then, there have been many developments. Some—such as expansion to full-school-day public kindergarten and introduction of the Child Care and Early Years Act—have been positive. There have also been many negative elements, however that have created multiple pressures for families and service providers.

Spaces are inequitably distributed and in short supply. Fees are unaffordable, documented at unprecedented levels and there are several-year-wait lists for fee subsidies. Many communities have lost valued public and non-profit spaces. The gender pay gap for the under-supported ECE workforce remains unchanged. Most would agree that there are many inefficiencies and inequities that plague child care and other early years programs in Ontario.

With the 2015 election of the Trudeau government, the national landscape has decisively changed for child care. The Trudeau government has committed to developing a National Early Learning and Child Care Framework in collaboration with provinces/territories/Indigenous communities aimed at “allow[ing provinces and territories] to move further in providing more affordable, accessible, inclusive, high-quality child care and early learning which considers the diverse needs of all children in Canada”. The federal government has also committed that the National Framework will be based on “research, evidence-based policy, and best practices in the delivery of early learning and child care”. For its part, the Ontario government has committed to “highlighting the need for national investment in child care and working with the federal government to support greater access to quality child care and early years services in Ontario”. In the 2016 Speech from the Throne, Ontario followed this up with a substantial financial commitment to expansion of 100,000 new regulated spaces over five years.

The Ontario government’s approach

The provincial government’s consultation document states that

We believe Ontarians should be able to choose from a range of high-quality early learning and child care programs that work best for their family at a reasonable cost. This is why the Ontario government is committed to working with parents, families and communities to develop a renewed framework for early years and child care, supported by an unprecedented investment in our child care system.

The province also states that a “focus on the following four key pillars will inform our renewed vision for Ontario’s early years:

- **Access** to licensed child care and early years programs;
- **Responsiveness** to needs of families and children through early years programs and child care in schools, communities, workplaces and at home;
- **Affordability** for families that need support;
- **Quality** programs that contribute to healthy child development measured through established province-wide outcomes;

...these four key pillars will guide Ontario’s renewed early years and child care policy framework and help us to achieve an accessible, responsive, affordable and high-quality child care and early years system which will meet the needs of children and families across the province in every community”.

CRRU’s response

CRRU welcomes the provincial governments’ intentions and generally agrees with the four pillars with several provisos and suggestions:

- CRRU's believes that access to child care should be for all families, all children whose parents choose it, regardless of income, family type, where they live, ability or disability, ethnicity or race. Thus, we recommend defining the Access pillar more specifically as “Universal Access” or “access for all children”. We think that universal access is a necessary long term goal, as there is both strong agreement that all families may need quality child care and good research evidence that supports universality as a best practice (see https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2016/12/Child_Care_AFB2017_technical_paper.pdf).

CRRU defines “access” to mean: all families are able to secure an affordable, appropriate (age, culture, language, parent schedule and convenience-appropriate) high quality regulated space in a service type (part-day, centre or home-based) that the parents choose. We define "access for all" as a long-term aspirational goal.

CRRU recommends moving towards such accessibility by setting targets and timetables in consultation with CMSMs, DDSABs, service providers and others and working with the federal government on policy and financing.

- The Affordability pillar should be reworded to reflect that (as recent research indicates) most families will be unable to afford the full cost of child care without financial support (See https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2016/12/A_Growing_Concern.pdf and <https://www1.toronto.ca/City%20Of%20Toronto/Children's%20Services/Files/pdf/T/Toronto%20Demand%20&%20Affordability%20Study%202016.pdf>

Regarding the subsidy system: Ontario's individual-family fee subsidy system was outdated even before the OECD recommended that Canada "move away from personal subsidy mechanisms toward operational funding" more than 12 years ago. In order to support all four pillars, Ontario will need to phase out the unworkable, inefficient subsidy system and replace it with well-designed base funding to services and a mechanism for affordable parent fees. CRRU favours a geared-to-income approach to parent fees and urges the province to consider building such an approach based on the current Ontario income test.

- CRRU supports the concept of the Responsiveness to families pillar, assuming that it signals commitment to meeting a range of family needs through accessible, comprehensive system of service types, cultural and language diversity, full inclusion of children with disabilities, and services suiting the diversity of local communities and individual families. However, policy, planning, research and financial support are needed to deconstruct and back up this pillar if it is to be meaningful.
- The Quality pillar as stated is, we argue, narrowly conceived. We argue that the provincial government should adopt a more expansive concept that does not limit the construct of "quality" to contributing to healthy child development. Instead it should be extended to other benefits to children such as happiness, well-being and children's rights and also to a broader, more ecological view that extends "quality" in ECEC to support for families, communities and the child care workforce as well (See , for example, https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2015/09/OS120_Summer2015_Quality_ECEC_for_all.pdf).

With this in mind, CRRU supports the idea of a much more hands-on provincial role in improving and assessing quality as an ongoing, integral part of the policy process. We argue that it would be more appropriate and evidence-based to use multiple mechanisms associated with a variety of clear quality goals rather than relying on "child outcomes" as a proxy for quality. This would include measuring process quality, tracking known indicators/predictors of quality and broader considerations of quality associated with goals such as democratic participation and meeting family needs. We do not support the idea that quality can be assured by giving parents better consumer information to purchase services in a market (although we believe that better information for parents should be available).

As well, as part of the space expansion and policy development, Ontario needs to make use of the copious knowledge about the structural factors and indicators associated with quality in child care and other early years programs and "modernize" Ontario's approach in line with this. This should include:

- A more publicly planned and managed approach;
- Better integration of child care and other early years programs such as kindergarten;
- Improved wages and working conditions for educators;
- Improved early childhood pre-service and professional development training for all educators in child care and kindergarten;
- Enhanced support for pedagogy including for the province's pedagogical framework *How does learning happen?*;

- Improved support for home child care agencies and required training for home child care providers;
- Stable, sustained funding for service providers, and+
- A plan for moving away from reliance on for-profit child care operations, which research shows is likely to be poorer quality as a sector. CRRU recommends that none of the new 100,000 spaces committed to be in profit-making operations.

We urge considering two ideas about quality that come from the European Union: first, that improving quality should be an integral ongoing part of the policy process, and, second, that “access without quality is of little merit”.

Beyond the pillars

A set of pillars or principles are not by themselves sufficient to guide policy development or a significant initiative such as the proposed expansion. The success of this initiative will depend very much upon how the pillars are operationalized and upon how well the implementation is planned and supported.

The document titled “A shared framework for building an early childhood education and care system for all”— development of which was lead by CRRU, the Canadian Child Care Federation, the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada and Campaign 2000

(http://www.childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/sharedframework_jan2016.pdf) – can be useful to the provincial government. It identifies a number of evidence-based elements that can help in operationalizing the four pillars (some of which are integrated into this document).

Significant roadblocks

There are several main significant roadblocks to a successful expansion initiative, each associated with one or more of the pillars:

- Difficulty recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of skilled professional early childhood educators and the links between these and poor wages and working conditions;
- Need for new expansion spaces to be affordable;
- Unaffordability of existing spaces;
- Limited supply of quality physical facilities needed to house new centre spaces;
- Governance issues including a) limited capacity of non-profit service providers to assume additional responsibility without sustainability; b) diminished supply and support for publicly-provided child care; and c) good evidence that expansion in the poorer quality, less efficient for-profit sector will not make a positive contribution to the high quality, accessible, affordable and responsive child care described in the four pillars.

As well, at a minimum, several additional issues need to be addressed as part of striving for accessibility, responsiveness to families, affordability and quality of child care and other early years programs:

- Ensuring full inclusion of children with disabilities;
- Enhancement of off- and on-reserve child care and other early years programs for and by Indigenous communities;
- Timely assessment and adjustment of full-day kindergarten programs to ensure that they too fit the four pillars (Access, Affordability, Responsiveness to Families, and Quality) and are working as well as they can be as part of a modernized, integrated child care and early years system.

Next steps to truly “modernize” child care and other early years programs in Ontario

At the time when Bill 10 was introduced, CRRU made the point that development and sustainability of the high quality early childhood education and child care system Ontario needs will continue to be impeded without a robust policy framework.

Such a framework would go a long way to addressing the roadblocks that currently impede needed initiatives such as the proposed 100,000 space expansion. Although addressing how to overcome the identified roadblocks will be a start, in the long-term, Ontario needs a clear vision and a full well-designed policy framework with long-term goals, targets and timetables.

Overall, Ontario needs to move child care out of the failed market model into a more publicly planned, managed and funded system.

With child care finally back on both the Ontario and national agendas, there’s no time like the present for the Ontario government to regain its historical leadership to move towards an accessible system of high quality responsive child care for all.