

Reflections on Shaping an Integrated System of Early Learning & Child Care and Education for Children in Canada

Introduction

In June 2009, the Ontario government released the report [*With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*](#). The report presents 20 recommendations for an integrated system of early learning and child care (ELCC) and family support services for children 0-12 within an expanded Ministry of Education. The report is the work of Dr. Charles Pascal, Special Advisor on early learning to the Premier of Ontario and Executive Director of the [Atkinson Charitable Foundation](#).

The first step in the implementation of this vision was the September 2009 introduction of “full-day” kindergarten for four- and five-year olds in selected elementary schools across Ontario. The model includes “wrap-around” ELCC before and after the kindergarten program. Early childhood educators are responsible for the before-and-after program and work in partnership with the teachers during the kindergarten session. Early childhood educators have been working with the education system in various ways in other provinces over the recent years, including [Educaring](#) in Manitoba and [Every Child A Better Future](#) in Prince Edward Island. The Pascal plan is the most detailed to date and has therefore stimulated considerable discussion across Canada. The [Canadian Child Care Federation](#)'s goal in writing this paper is to encourage reflection and discussion on what this move towards an integrated education system could mean for Canada's children and families, as well as the early childhood educators whose work would be incorporated into this system.

Challenges

There are many potential challenges in implementing this vision, including:

- Enhancing the understanding of the education sector and the general public about early learning and child care – its importance in providing the best start for young children and the pedagogy of learning through play that is the foundation for early learning.
- Determining new knowledge to be acquired by early childhood educators, teachers and the Ministry, and supporting any requirement for additional learning both financially and with reasonable timelines in the transition phase.
- Finding solutions for an equitable system of qualifications and remuneration in the new combined sector.
- Maintaining the political will to build such a system: in many provinces, there is initial interest but the challenges to creating the system must be faced over a lengthy period of time. A long term commitment will be required from all.

- Ensuring that the early learning programs reflect high quality ELCC as determined by the research with appropriate ratios, qualified educators, and proven pedagogies and curricula. The Canadian Child Care Federation's [National Statement on Quality Early Learning and Child Care](#) provides a research-based description of the elements of quality.

Opportunities

The inclusion of early learning and child care as a distinct unit in an education ministry presents promising opportunities:

- Increased recognition of early learning and child care as an essential foundational building block for optimal human development;
- More opportunities for *all* children to get a better start;
- Stronger partnerships among services for young children (ELCC, family support services and education);
- Stable funding under a ministry of education;
- More consistent quality within each province/territory;
- A role for the federal government in supporting national consistency of quality programs for early learning and child care.

Keys to Success

- Understanding of and belief in the importance of the early years in supporting children's learning and future success in life: the [Council for Early Childhood Development](#) (the research partner) is leading the creation of a network that links national organizations in education and early learning and child care to help build this understanding. The Canadian Child Care Federation is pleased to play an active role as the ELCC partner in this work. The education partners are the [Canadian Education Association](#) (CEA) and the [Canadian Association of School Administrators](#) (CASA).
- Mutual respect among the partnering services: early learning and child care and family support services have worked collaboratively with a considerable degree of success. A three-way partnership (early learning and child care, education, and family support programs) has been tested and proven successful in [Toronto's First Duty](#) project. The three-partner model must be encouraged and strengthened.
- Curricula that clearly reflect the philosophy and the pedagogy of early learning. Ontario's [Early Learning for Every Child Today](#) is a guide to support curriculum and pedagogy in Ontario's early childhood settings, including child care centres, kindergarten classrooms, home child care, nursery schools, Ontario Early Years Centres and other family support programs, and early intervention services.
- Staffing that reflects current research on optimal adult/child ratios.
- Willingness of the professions involved (early childhood educators, teachers and ministry staff) to enhance their knowledge as necessary for this new approach to education.

- Remuneration levels that are consistent with the knowledge and skills required to provide quality ELCC in a partnership setting.
- Ensuring that the new system meets the needs of *all* children including those with special needs, Aboriginal children, second language learners and children living in disadvantaged circumstances.
- Commitment to complete the development of the system in an ordered sequence and a reasonable time frame.
- Support for quality assurance and continuous improvement in the system.

Conclusion

All Canadians need to be engaged constructively in the discussions on building an expanded education system that includes early learning and child care, family support programs and education for children 0-12. Quality in early learning and child care must be understood, appreciated, reflected and supported in any partnership system. The system must be based on the research to ensure its quality. The builders of the system must be patient and determined; building a high quality system will take time. Dr. Pascal's *From Where I Sit* article in the Spring 2010 issue of *Interaction* asks "What should it mean to be a child in Canada?" He concludes "... early childhood educators and teachers who are attuned to the needs of young children by training or nature or experience, need to play a key role in this nation building exercise in order to move the clock forward more quickly to a time when we no longer ask what it should mean, but rather what it does mean to be a child in Canada."

CCCCF supports the integrated model in principle; it can build a strong and seamless system that will enhance services for children and families and give our young children a chance for optimal development. Early learning and child care must have a strong, informed voice over the coming months and years. CCCC is committed to being engaged in the development of a high quality system informed by this plan. As a national organization with provincial and territorial affiliate organizations, the Canadian Child Care Federation plays a key leadership role for ELCC in Canada.

CCCCF wants to hear your reflections and will maintain and moderate discussion on its [facebook](#) page. We invite you to share your reflections and suggest weblinks for other important information on shaping a high quality integrated education system for children 0-12 in Canada that will support all children in Canada to reach their full potential.

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