
Modernizing the Early Years:
Submission to the Government of Ontario
in Response to
Modernizing Child Care in Ontario

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The Atkinson Centre promotes research on child development and early learning policies and practices that serve young children and their families. It is one of twenty-one research centres and institutes at OISE/University of Toronto that facilitate partnerships with other post-secondary institutions and community organizations. The Centre is committed to using the best available evidence to inform public discourse, public policy and the professional learning of early childhood educators and elementary school teachers.

At the Atkinson Centre, we remain dedicated to pursuing learning opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to strengthen their capacity to bridge research with policy and practice through quality learning experiences.

The Atkinson Centre's response to the Province of Ontario's discussion paper, *Modernizing Child Care in Ontario*, draws on extensive evidence documenting the elements that support quality and accessible service delivery. It is informed by consultations with members of the Atkinson Task Force, an alliance of early childhood program operators, professional organizations, parents and educators. The initial Atkinson response, "Atkinson Letter: Modernizing the Early Years", is available online at www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson.

Informed by national and international evidence, many jurisdictions are taking steps to break down the silos that have plagued the delivery of early childhood services to the detriment of children, families, service providers and taxpayers. New approaches are driven by a more holistic view of families and an understanding that early childhood is a developmental phase beginning at conception and continuing to about age 8. A modern service system designed to meet the needs of today's families involves more than child care. Reworking the early years one service at a time entrenches divisions. Nor is it desirable to have the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services simultaneously working on separate early years frameworks. Public health, family support, early intervention and extended day programs for children are essential elements of coherent system development and require equal consideration.

The Atkinson Centre recommends:

1. A single early childhood policy framework that promotes seamless access to quality child and parenting programs and resources from conception through age 8: this begins with transferring the systems management for Ontario Early Years Centres, Family Resource Programs, Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, Early Literacy coordinators and early intervention services such as Preschool Speech and Language to the Early Learning Division of the Ministry of Education. This would permit more coherent operations, better staff utilization and improve linkages to child and family programs offered by Public Health.

Integrate public health programs

The modern framing of public health should be embedded into a modern framing of early years policy. Public Health plays an important role in the earliest phases of human development through prenatal care, breast-feeding support, parenting programs, early ID, and health promotion programs. However, Healthy Babies Healthy Children is an outlier under the jurisdiction of MCYS. Early years providers and Public Health cooperate at the community level, with Public Health often delivering its programs in children's services environments. It is therefore logical to replicate this cooperation at the policy level through a joint ministerial committee for health and education responsible for child and family services.

2. Situate oversight for HBHC in the Ministry of Health with other Public Health child and family programs.
3. Establish a joint ministerial committee to facilitate the linkages between Public Health, education and other early childhood services.

Address inequities in Aboriginal programming

Service integration presents particular challenges for some Aboriginal communities due to colonial relationships

Rationalize quality monitoring

Ontario needs one quality assessment tool, which is used in all early childhood settings, including kindergarten. Such a tool can be used to support regional planning and to identify and

The professional partnerships in kindergarten classrooms have many lessons to offer. Teaming early childhood educators with teachers and the school infrastructure is already showing highly

Systems planning is essential to service stability. Regional systems managers are best suited to plan,

27. Access to quality programming for children should not be tied to their parents' workforce attachment. Family income should be the only eligibility criteria for child care fee subsidies.

Strengthen the integration of schools and early childhood programs

A 'schools-first' approach to locating early childhood programs in schools makes good use of existing public assets and emphasizes seamless programming for children and convenience for families.

Out-of-school hours programming for children 4-12-years should be accommodated within existing educational space. Integrating K-12-year-old education and care would help free up space in schools suitable for younger children. The integration of child care and education means programs serving preschool children must receive equal consideration when allocating school space. While many school boards have been exemplary in assuming their responsibilities for early years programs others have not. This indicates the province cannot rely on guidelines to ensure integrated behaviors.

28. Modify the education funding formula to include space and infrastructure supports such as maintenance and administration for school-located early years programs.
29. Where early years programs are located in public buildings no rental fees should be charged.

The modernization of early childhood services system is long overdue in Ontario. The task is complex but never before has the sector been as ready to accept change. This affords government a rare opportunity to do the bold reengineering required. In addition to the feedback from this consultation, the blueprint for change outlined in *Our Best Future in Mind* is available to draw on. There are also lessons to be learned from other jurisdictions both inside Canada and abroad to point us towards success and help avoid pitfalls.

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