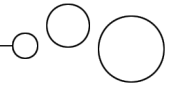


COALITION OF

child care advocates

OF BC



Working together for a community based, non-profit child care system that is high quality, affordable, accessible, publicly funded and accountable.

YOU CAN'T HAVE EARLY LEARNING WITHOUT CARE

July 2008

In June 2008, BC's new Early Childhood Learning Agency released a Consultation Paper, "*Expanding Early Learning in British Columbia for Children Aged 3-5*". The Paper is meant to "elicit views from a wide range of people and organizations on the expansion of early learning programs in British Columbia." (See http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/ecla/topics/consultation_paper08.pdf)

The possible expansion of services for 3-5 year olds is a significant and important development. If it reflects a new provincial commitment to universal, publicly funded and democratically controlled services for young children — the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC (CCCABC) views this as a victory for those who advocate on behalf of young children and working families.

If done well — expansion can help build a community controlled, high quality, universal and affordable system that meets the needs of all. But, if done poorly, it can undermine childhood development, create more barriers for working families and further destabilize BC's fragile child care services.

The Consultation Paper reaffirms much of the evidence that the community has known of and used to inform advocacy and practice for some time. Yet, given their child care record to date and the lack of adequate time for meaningful community input, many are skeptical about this government's commitment to really listen to the community and to act on the evidence.

We hope government proves the skeptics wrong by implementing an approach to expanded services for 3-5 year olds that incorporates the following key lessons.

THE STARTING PLACE

The research, evidence and the lived experience of BC children, families and communities make one lesson crystal clear – **you can't have Early Learning without Care**. Here's why

1. Children need caring relationships to learn and develop.

For young children, learning occurs in the context of nurturing relationships that support holistic development. Learning occurs through play-based, developmentally appropriate experiences throughout children's waking hours — not in neatly defined time slots. The ability to provide consistent, caring relationships in safe and stimulating environments must be at the core of sound early childhood policy and programs.

2. **BC families need care for their children.**

The majority of BC mothers with young children work outside the home. They need care for their children. The ability to provide fully integrated quality care and early learning must be the driving force of any new policy and program directions.

3. **Policy makers need to take care.**

Positive outcomes for children can only be achieved through well-designed and well-implemented programs. The ability to put children and families first without destabilizing existing early learning programs must be the chief concern of the provincial government.

As a starting place, government must end the divide between ‘child care’ and ‘early learning’.

If the Ministry of Education has a mandate for programs for young children, they need to accept responsibility for ‘**care and learning**’ because you can’t have one without the other.

GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT

The Consultation Paper provides little indication of BC’s intentions and is strangely silent on the BC context, planning assumptions and possible options.

However, the Paper highlights a number of ‘basics’ adopted elsewhere that must be part of BC’s approach to any expansion of programs for 3-5 year olds:

1. A commitment to **legislate an entitlement to universal access** to publicly funded, community controlled programs for 3-5 year olds.
2. A commitment to meet the needs of working families through programs that **integrate learning and care in a seamless day at one location**.
3. A commitment to **inclusive, play based** programs that respect young children’s rights to quality of life.
4. A commitment to **employ and adequately compensate qualified staff** with expertise in early childhood.
5. A commitment to **build on the strengths** of community-based quality child care programs.
6. And – last but not least – a commitment to **allocate adequate resources** to get the job done.

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE

If these ‘basics’ are in place, some key elements government would need to include in its plan to expand programs for 3-5 year olds are:

1. **A new public policy to provide all 3-5 year olds with access to free, publicly funded, high quality early learning and care services.**

*Given the 2008 provincial Throne Speech commitment to 'full school day programming', **the minimum entitlement would be in the range of 30 hours a week** to include a standard 5 hour school day and a fully staffed lunch hour as required by young children.*

This approach simply extends the current policy of universal access for older children to attend a public school.

2. Public funding, at full parity, for early learning and care programs in both school and community based settings.

As in New Zealand, families would be able to access their 30 hours of publicly funded early learning and care in a school-based 'K' setting or in a quality community-based child care program. Those requiring more than 30 hours a week of learning and care would still pay for additional hours but public support for those who can't afford fees would continue.

Children would experience a truly seamless day without disruption in the caring relationships they establish with adults.

Schools providing expanded programming would be required to have a plan in place to meet children's learning and care needs beyond 30 hours.

Existing quality child care programs would be accountable for using public funds to enhance quality early learning experiences. Policies to ensure that public funds go into services that are community owned and democratically controlled, just like schools, would be essential.

And, while more 'spaces' would still be needed, using existing child care spaces would reduce the cost of renovating schools to meet the needs of 3 and 4 year olds.

This approach builds on strengths. It extends internationally accepted education principles of free, universal, democratic control to care and learning programs for young children.

Community-based early learning and care programs become equal partners with schools in meeting the needs of young children and families rather than simply 'wrap around' services.

3. A staffing recruitment and retention plan that allows early childhood educators an opportunity to achieve parity with primary teachers.

Qualified educators, with appropriate post secondary training, are essential to the successful expansion of programs for 3-5 year olds.

BC's early childhood educators have the expertise to deliver publicly funded learning and care programs for 3-5 year olds. Yet, as a result of low wages and lack of appreciation for the value of the work they do, BC is currently experiencing a child care staffing crisis.

The possible expansion of programs for 3-5 year olds provides an opportunity to address this crisis by moving towards parity in both credentialing of and working conditions for early childhood educators and primary teachers.

This approach recognizes the contribution that both early childhood educators and primary teachers bring to programs for 3-5 year olds. It particularly addresses the need for staff who have expertise in meeting the needs of very young children – especially 3 year olds.

4. A democratic governance structure that provides communities with the mandate, tools and resources they need to plan, develop and deliver a publicly funded system of high quality child care and learning.

A recent study of community controlled governance of BC's child care system (see http://www.cccabc.bc.ca/cccabcdocs/governance/ggcc_final_report.pdf) concludes that just like schools, libraries and parks, child care programs need to be democratically planned and delivered by an accountable body that has a mandate and resources to get the job done.

As noted above, if the Ministry of Education has a mandate to develop early learning programs AND government accepts the fact that “care and education are not separate concepts and that quality programs for young children provide both”¹ then the question of governance of expanded early learning and care programs needs to be front and centre.

This approach builds on the New Zealand experience where one ministry is responsible for supporting both the shared and unique aspects of services to children whether delivered in community or school based settings.

CONCLUSION

This overview of key lessons outlines a way to meet the needs of children, families and communities through expanded publicly funded, universal care and learning programs.

If government is serious about moving in this direction, the CCCABC is ready, willing and able to work with them and the community on detailed answers to remaining questions.

We also want to remind government that the job will not be done until they also address the learning and care needs of infants, toddlers and young school-aged children.

We understand that the new Early Childhood Learning Agency will come back to the community in the fall with more clearly defined options. At that time, we will assess these options based on the degree to which they incorporate the key lessons above and move us towards a universal, quality, community controlled, integrated system of learning and care.

BC children, families, child care providers and communities need and deserve nothing less!

¹ *Expanding Early Learning in British Columbia for Children Aged 3-5*. Retrieved from http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/ecla/topics/consultation_paper08.pdf