

The Honourable Ken Dryden
Minister of Social Development
Room 334- West Block
House of Commons
Ottawa, K1A 0A6

September 2004

Dear Minister Dryden:

We are individuals who have advocated for many years so all Canadian children may enjoy the benefits of high quality child care. Most of us have experience as parent users of child care, some work in child care programs while others are involved in research, teaching or community and policy development. We are writing to offer our most sincere congratulations on your appointment as Minister for Social Development and to offer our experience and expertise as you develop a child care strategy for Canada.

Your government's 2004 election commitment -- Foundations: A National Early Learning and Child Care Program -- represents a major social victory for Canada. Promised new investments, and sector and community enthusiasm provides an opportunity to get it right from the start by putting in place a solid public policy framework for child care.

The QUAD principles the Prime Minister outlined during the election provide a solid base for the framework:

QUALITY. The available research shows that caregivers trained in child development, strong regulation and monitoring, adequate financing and public or non-profit administrations are the pillars of quality in early learning and child care services.

UNIVERSALITY. Research demonstrates that the most successful early years strategies provide service within a universal context. Programs implemented for all children with provisions to include those with special needs due to disability, income, race or language promote inclusion by providing equitable opportunity. Developing a sufficient supply of high quality child care to accommodate all preschool aged children whose parents wish them to participate is a task requiring considerable resources and long-term planning.

ACCESSIBILITY. Child care is needed in urban, rural and isolated communities. It must be affordable to achieve the equity that has been the benchmark of Canadian social programs. There are a number of ways to design financial accessibility for families; however, funding the program directly rather than providing vouchers or fee subsidies to individual parents is more likely to promote system stability and thereby achieve the QUAD objectives. Accessibility also means that no child's disability will be a barrier to his full participation in child care programs, and that the extra costs associated with quality inclusion of children with special needs will not be the responsibility of either families or individual programs.

DEVELOPMENTAL. Canada's child care program must have two main objectives – promoting the early learning of all children while at the same time supporting parents to work, study, care for other family members or participate in their community. Meeting these objectives will mean integrating the program fragments that now provide early learning and care separately.

In developing a child care program, Canada has the advantage of the lessons learned in building other major social programs such as health care and public education as well as the experiences of other countries that have had comprehensive early learning systems in place for decades. In addition, Canada's strategy is advised by research that documents the elements of high quality child care.

From these sources we know that:

1. Funding alone will not produce the kind of high quality early learning and child care that research shows has positive outcomes for children and families. Adequate funding must be accompanied by a strong policy framework. A framework should include legislation, administration, financing and evaluation to enable planning and development of the system. It should also clearly set out principles, objectives, priorities and targets for service
2. For the QUAD principles to be realized, provincial regulations will need to be strengthened in a variety of areas including caregiver training, physical facility and programming/curricula requirements.
3. Analysis of other countries' child care situations (such as the United States and Australia) confirm our long held position that Canadian early learning and child care should be a public or community-based service, not a commercial business. To incorporate non-profit auspice into a pan-Canadian child care strategy will require leadership. However, unless commercial restrictions are in place, the conditions of NAFTA and other trade agreements could encourage foreign corporations to access public funding to establish their child care chains here. Moreover, a for-profit direction for child care would be inconsistent with your governments' appropriate defence of public health care.
4. Building a child care system will require a transitional phase of service development. Federal policy should encourage and help provinces to rationalize their early learning and child care programs to provide a stable platform for integrating and building upon the current service patchwork.

Thank you for your consideration. We appreciate the complexity of developing an early learning and child care program and would be pleased to share our expertise. We look forward to working with you.

Yours truly,

70 people from various regions of the country – coast to coast to coast - including several Board members and friends of the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC