

BUILDING A STRONG AND EQUAL PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN CHILDCARE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN CANADA

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Overview

In 2007, Ontario, Canada's largest province, began to develop integrated "full-day early learning" for all four and five year olds. In the initial phase, several key challenges have emerged: merging the public kindergarten system with market-driven childcare, financing the new program, maintaining stability in user-pay childcare as four and five year olds move to the new program, determining staffing models, bridging differences between kindergarten and childcare staff and managing the phase-in. How Ontario meets these challenges will have major implications for the future of early childcare education programs across Canada.

Current Social Trends that have affected Early Childhood Education Programs

Canada, like many modern nations is experiencing strong changes in demographic trends. Many of these trends were taken into consideration when creating policy related to Canada's early childhood programs. Key trends include high participation in the labor force by mothers of young children, an ethnically and racially diverse population (especially in urban areas), a shrinking child population, and a rising rate of child poverty.

Questions about Canada's New Program

- *Who is Responsible?* - Elected school boards are responsible for kindergarten, while municipal governments administer provincial childcare funds. Public kindergarten is an entitlement throughout Ontario while childcare programs are delivered in a private model.
- *What are the Goals?* - To make sure that children in Ontario are ready to learn by the time they start first grade.
- *Who are the Teachers?* - A four year undergraduate degree plus a year of teacher training is required for kindergarten teachers but there are no specific education requirements for early education teachers.
- *How is it Financed?* - Kindergarten are entirely publicly-funded with no parent fees and childcare funds come from a mix of parent fees and public funds which are predominantly delivered as fee subsidies attached to individual low income families.

Conclusion

This paper concludes by suggesting eight policy lessons that should be considered in Canada and beyond. They include: 1) a systematic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation, 2) a strong and equal partnership with the education system, 3) a universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support, 4) substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure, 5) a participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance, 6) appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision, 7) systematic attention to monitoring and data collection, and 8) a stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation. Together with other research and knowledge, these lessons are all integrally connected to meeting the challenges in a major policy initiative such as the transition to full-day early learning in Ontario.

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