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Westcoast Child Care
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BC Child Care Advocacy Forum Submission to Early Childhood Learning Agency Consultation July 2008

The BC Child Care Advocacy Forum is an alliance of 6 provincial child care organizations that have worked together since 1999 to advance a Common Vision and Agenda for Child Care in BC. (http://www.advocacyforum.bc.ca/common_agenda.html)

The Advocacy Forum represents thousands of front-line providers and employers from all types of child care, families and concerned citizens. While each member organization advances independent positions of particular interest to their members, the positions adopted by the Forum reflect the highest level of consensus that exists within BC's child care community today.

The possible expansion of early learning programs for children aged 3-5 through BC's ministry of education is a significant public policy development that will impact the lives of children, families, caregivers and communities.

As the Early Childhood Learning Agency's Consultation Paper "*Expanding Early Learning in British Columbia for Children Aged 3-5*" highlights, we lag behind our trading partners in providing universal access to programs for young children.

But, whether expanded programs for BC's 3-5 year olds are designed and implemented in ways that meet the needs of children, families and communities depend on how government applies the evidence and lessons learned.

The Child Care Advocacy Forum offers the following advice on both the opportunities and challenges ahead.

The Opportunity

The key opportunity is clearly a recognition that the founding principles of our public education system – legislated entitlement, universality, and public funding – are equally important to sound public policy for younger children.

For over two decades, the need for a comprehensive system of quality programs that promote healthy childhood development and meet the needs of working families in BC has been well documented. Provincial, national and international research has all clearly demonstrated the economic and social benefits of public investment in universal programs for young children. Families, service providers, and communities have all called for appropriate policy and adequate funding to realize these benefits.

As the Consultation Paper highlights, this is consistent with "growing levels of interest in increasing universal access to quality early learning for children aged three to six..."¹ internationally, where many jurisdictions already provide or are moving towards providing free, universal access for 3, 4 and/or 5 year olds.

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

If an expansion of programs for BC's 3-5 year olds is based on these principles, it represents an historic opportunity to meet the needs of children and families in ways that strengthen the whole community.

This opportunity can be realized through legislating entitlement for all young children to equal access to publicly funded programs – just as we do now for older children.

The Challenges

There are 3 key challenges government needs to address if progress is to be achieved.

1. Meeting Children's Needs

The Consultation Paper affirms what families, caregivers and researchers have long known – early learning and care are NOT separate concepts. Quality child care IS early learning. Children learn in the context of caring relationships and play-based experiences that enable them to grow socially, emotionally, physically and cognitively.

As the Consultation Paper acknowledges, a downward extension of formal 'education' or a narrow focus on school readiness does not have desired results.

And yet, BC continues to separate its policy, planning and funding of 'early learning' programs from its child care policy – somehow suggesting that young children's real learning will only occur during the hours they attend a school-based program.

The first challenge then is to truly integrate early learning and care.

For five year olds, a full school day Kindergarten that is fully integrated with extended hours for children of working families may meet their needs and reduce some of the problems families now experience finding care that complements a part day K program.

However, meeting the developmental needs of even younger children makes the need to integrate learning and care in seamless programs at one location even more critical. It is hard to imagine that government would consider transporting 3 year olds from one setting to another twice a day or would treat the hours before and after school as less important to the health and well being of children.

Truly integrated programs for very young children will require staff with the training and expertise to meet their needs, facilities that welcome and are safe for young children, and a 'day' that includes independent and cooperative indoor and outdoor play; 'curriculum' that responds to children's interests; physical support with meals and personal hygiene as well as time for rest.

If government proceeds with expanded programs for young children that continue to divide care from learning – it will not be meeting children's needs.

2. Meeting Families' Needs

The Consultation Paper has little to say about BC families with 3-5 year olds. And yet, it is unlikely that we will be able to successfully support young children if we don't take into account the needs of their primary caregivers – families.

The second challenge then is to design and implement programs for 3-5 year olds in ways that respond to the real needs of their families.

The majority of BC parents with young children are in the paid labour force. They need access to quality, affordable care for their children beyond traditional school hours and when schools are closed. They do not need a 'patchwork' of programs, and they certainly don't need or want lower quality care for part of the day or year.

Families also need access to quality, affordable care and learning opportunities for their infants, their toddlers and their school-aged children.

If government proceeds with plans that only address the traditional school day and calendar – they will not be meeting families' needs.

3. Meeting Communities' Needs

The Consultation Paper is silent on the needs of communities. But, communities and employers across the province identify the lack of access to quality, affordable child care as a key challenge to attracting young families and filling labour shortages.

Building on existing community assets by using vacant school space for early childhood programs makes sense. But, schools in neighbourhoods with many children are full. Relying solely on schools space for expanded programs for 3-5 year olds will not provide universal or equitable access in our communities.

Existing child care spaces are an important community asset. They provide integrated care and learning for children, and meet the needs of working families. The problem is they are not supported by sound public policy that ensures universal access nor do they receive their fair share of public funds.

The third challenge then is to design and implement programs for 3-5 year olds in ways that build on the strengths of BC's current child care services.

A narrow focus on expanded school-based 'early learning' programs for 3-5 year olds could further destabilize existing community-based child care programs. And, the quality of these programs will be eroded if government thinks that reducing Community Care Facilities Licensing's current minimum child care regulations is part of the answer.

If government proceeds with plans that ignore or further isolate existing child care services – they will not be using limited community resources effectively or enhancing existing services that have been designed to meet community needs.

Conclusion

If BC's new Early Childhood Learning Agency designs and implements expanded programs for 3-5 year olds in a way that is based on the evidence and responds to the lived experience of BC children, families and communities – progress can be achieved.

This requires careful attention to the current context and an openness to integrating early learning and care in order to meet the needs of all.

We share the concern expressed by many that the short time line for this consultation meets political rather than community needs. A three week, summer feedback window does not meet any reasonable test of meaningful community input.

We understand there will be a second round of consultation on 'options' in the fall. We are more than willing to work with the Early Childhood Learning Agency as they develop their options. And, we fully expect that the community will have adequate time to share their views on the implications of these options for children, families and communities.

The BC Child Care Advocacy Forum remains committed to a high quality comprehensive system that:

- entitles all children access to quality child care and early childhood programs
- provides families with choices from a range of coordinated, quality, licensed and regulated child care programs
- is publicly funded through the tax system and affordable for all families who need or want to use it
- provides caregivers with wages, benefits and working conditions that reflects their education, experience and responsibilities.

Our support for expanded programs for 3-5 year olds will depend on whether BC moves us towards this vision.