



## Early Childhood Education and the Public School System

Early childhood education is a key priority of the provincial Ministry of Education. While the implementation of all-day K starting next year has garnered most of the attention, the Ministry has a larger plan and agenda for the delivery of new program initiatives down into the early years.

To date, StrongStart has been the centerpiece of Ministry ECE initiatives. The program's implementation over the past three years has been a major success and all indications are that the Ministry intends to continue expanding it.

The Ministry has also signaled an intention to explore offering ECE programming for 3 and 4 year olds under the broad K-12 umbrella. The idea was first broached in the 2008 Throne Speech that announced creation of an Early Childhood Learning Agency to investigate provision early childhood education services within the school system.

This past spring, the province's Throne Speech announced an intention to seek partnerships with the "private sector" in moving forward on the goal of extending programs to 3 and 4 year olds.

CUPE fully supports the goal of providing enhanced programs to pre-school aged children. Whether to further school readiness or to promote the development of positive social skills and interactions amongst young people, the provision of early childhood educational programming has a proven track record backed up by hard research that confirms its efficacy in meeting the social and education needs of young children and their families.

CUPE, however, does not support the idea of advancing this agenda in concert with private sector partners. There are several good reasons for not going down this road:

- The evaluation of StrongStart undertaken by UBC's Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) underlines the importance of having such programming fully integrated into the larger K-12 environment – for reasons of program coherence, smooth transitions for pre-schoolers, and access to professional development for ECE staff. HELP's evaluation also underscored the importance of having ECE staff feel a genuine sense of belonging to and participation in the larger professional culture that public schools provide. This is something that only full program integration can ensure.
- Public school support staff already contain a large reservoir of existing ECE talent and expertise that could be tapped to ensure a smooth implementation of ECE programs within the public school system. A 2009 report prepared by the CUPE's BC Region titled *Education assistants in British Columbia: an educational profile and agenda* showed that close to 1 in 5 of BC's 10,000+ currently employed education assistants have ECE training and/or credentials.
- CUPE, other support staff unions and the provincial employer's association (BCPSEA) are currently involved in a multi-faceted effort to facilitate the upgrading of support staff skills and educational qualifications under the

auspices of the Support Staff Education and Adjustment Committee (SSEAC). Future training initiatives targeting ECEs could be established under SSEAC auspices to ensure that skill sets match the skill needs that will be produced with introduction of new ECE programming into our public schools.

- Boards of education have the inherent capacity to address a range of special needs and the ability to meet the distinct educational requirements of different groups of students. This capacity comes from boards having long held a leadership role in pioneering delivery of special needs, aboriginal, ESL, athletic and remedial programming geared to meeting the needs of a diverse student population. Such expertise will be invaluable in meeting challenges that will be faced with significant expansion of ECE-level programming.

Our school system faces a need to prepare for significant future expansion of ECE programs. CUPE's view is that new early learning initiatives need to be integrated with and delivered in concert with other areas of public school programming in as seamless a manner as possible. These initiatives will also need to be coordinated with an existing array of childcare programs.

CUPE agrees with the perspective provided by Dr. Charles Pascal, lead author of Ontario's highly influential *Early Learning* report. Pascal writes that the public education system is best suited to address the fragmentation that currently plagues early childhood programming, and to expand access and opportunities for children. He goes on to note that boards of education are in a strong position to eliminate duplication that occurs when a number of contracted partners are involved in service delivery.

CUPE feels that the need for quality programming, seamless service delivery and sensitivity to the diverse needs of students make a compelling case for housing ECE programs within the public school system. At the same time, these requirements show that outsourced programs or private sector involvement is not the way to proceed.