

Summary of Community Consultations

Ministry of Children and Family Development

Ministry of Education

Introduction

British Columbia is committed to giving children the strongest possible start by increasing supports available for child care, early childhood development programs and early learning programs, all of which should increase the proportion of children entering school ready to learn. The years between birth and age six are a critical time in a child's life. The nurturing that occurs in early childhood influences health, well-being and learning skills for a lifetime.

In the Speech from the Throne on September 12, 2005, government set out Five Great Goals for British Columbia:

1. To make BC the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent.
2. To lead the way in North America in healthy living and physical fitness.
3. To build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities, special needs, children at risk and seniors.
4. To lead the world in sustainable environmental management, with the best air and water quality, and the best fisheries management, bar none.
5. To create more jobs per capita than anywhere else in Canada.

In order to realize those goals, the government is developing a plan to ensure that BC's children have the best possible future – beginning with an emphasis on strengthening support for children aged birth – 6 (the early years) in three key areas:

- healthy development
- education, learning and literacy, and
- child care.

In September 2005, the province signed the 2005 Early Learning and Child Care Agreement in Principle. Under this agreement BC was to receive \$633.3 million over five years. In order to seek advice on the priorities for investment under the agreement, the ministries of Education and Children and Family Development embarked on a series of province-wide consultations during the fall and winter of 2005/06.

In addition, the consultations were to seek advice on implementing the Ministry of Education's broader mandate, which now includes: life-long literacy, early learning, libraries and health promoting schools, as well as community development and access, as they relate to these service areas.

It should be noted that in February 2006 a new federal government was elected and the ELCC Agreement in Principle was subsequently cancelled. The Province will receive funding for fiscal 2006/07 but this will be the last year of federal government support under this agreement. The new federal government has made commitments to child care through a universal child care plan– the details of which are still forthcoming.

The government remains committed to its vision to provide access to quality early learning and child care in all BC communities.

We recognize that families and professionals who live and work with children every day have valuable insights into what children need for optimal learning, health and development. Communities are also frequently at the forefront of positive change, leading and championing new initiatives that help improve overall outcomes for children.

This summary identifies common themes and issues that arose through the consultations. The feedback received on early learning and child care will continue to be used to inform provincial priorities. The findings will ultimately be reflected in a comprehensive Early Years Strategy.

About the Consultations

The consultation process began in the fall of 2005 and concluded in January 2006.

The ministries hosted meetings in each of 60 school districts, with local community partners invited by district staff who were specially trained to facilitate the sessions. The meetings were designed to include groups of community leaders and educators. Information was shared about provincial demographics and future trends that will impact on learning and communities. Participants also discussed each of the areas covered by the Ministry of Education's newly expanded mandate to include leadership and responsibility in five key areas, life long literacy, early learning, libraries, health promoting schools and community development and access.

In addition, community sessions focusing on BC's vision and priorities for early learning and child care were held in Kelowna, Langley, Prince Rupert, Cranbrook, Prince George, Nanaimo, Vancouver and Surrey. These sessions were advertised and open to the public. Interested parties were also invited to comment via the web using an online feedback form. Seven additional consultation sessions were held with specific stakeholder groups. Two involved Aboriginal communities, and the balance focused on parents, early childhood educators and provincial child care advocacy groups.

During these sessions participants were asked for their feedback on a proposed vision, objectives and principles for early learning and child care in BC. Sessions were organized around seven building blocks for early learning and child care: human resources, subsidies, operating funding, capital funding, supported child development, community planning and early learning initiatives. Participants were then asked to provide their top priorities in these areas.

Through the consultations, hundreds of British Columbians shared their knowledge and experience, which will contribute to the development of a long-term, integrated strategy that will support the healthy development of all BC communities.

What Communities Want – Common Themes

There were a wide array of opinions and ideas brought forward throughout the province-wide consultations. However, there were some common themes raised. Generally, the consultations confirmed there was support for an accessible, affordable, high-quality system of early learning and child care in BC; for initiatives supporting life-long learning and literacy for families and communities; and for a continued emphasis on health-promoting schools. Respondents identified human resources development as the highest priority for ELCC funding followed by support for operating funding, community child care planning, support for subsidies, supported child development. Other priorities identified included capital funding and early learning initiatives.

In addition to articulating their key priorities, participants identified barriers to achieving those priorities, and put forward their ideas and suggestions for removing barriers, strengthening services, and better meeting existing and emerging needs.

Throughout the process, five consistent themes emerged. These are described in the pages that follow.

1. Accessibility

Families want access to a range of programs and services in their communities that can accommodate the needs and values of individual families. Access means a number of things: that services exist; that they are close to families; that families can find them; that families can afford them; and that the services have the capacity to meet families' individual needs. Participants noted that even the best programs and services have limited value if the families who need them can't access them.

Child care was identified as a primary need of working families, and limited access to quality child care was cited as a key barrier, especially among vulnerable populations and in remote communities. There was general agreement that access to quality child care must be a priority.

There was agreement that all British Columbians should have access to life-long literacy initiatives, and that public schools can play a key role in achieving that objective. Many participants also said they favoured a community-led approach that recognizes and responds to local needs and priorities.

Participants also made the following suggestions:

- enhance early learning initiatives to ensure parents have choice and flexibility in selecting an early childhood development experience for their children;
- increase the availability of early learning, literacy and child care programs that reflect Aboriginal language, cultural traditions, values and practices;
- increase access to schools and other public facilities;
- maximize physical and electronic access to libraries;
- help families overcome barriers such as a lack of transportation options, especially in remote communities;
- give families access to community or neighbourhood “hubs” that offer a wide range of integrated services;
- continue support for child care subsidies to support lower-income families;
- continue to provide sufficient funding and support to the Supported Child Development program to ensure that children with special needs can access quality early childhood development and child care services;
- target new investments to support low-income families and those whose children have special needs.

2. Quality

Participants agreed that the ultimate goal should be that all children be supported in a safe, stimulating environment that promotes healthy growth, learning and development. These were seen as hallmarks of quality, which many linked directly to the education, skills and abilities of caregivers.

Parents in particular voiced concerns about the need for consistency and continuity in child care programs. Many had experienced high levels of staff turnover, which they felt had a negative impact on their children.

Participants also made the following suggestions:

- increase investments in human resource development in child care and early childhood education so that wages, working conditions and professional development opportunities in these sectors are sufficient to recruit and retain skilled staff;
- provide a range of developmentally appropriate early learning programs that address every aspect of children’s well-being (physical, emotional, cognitive, etc.);
- support parents, teachers and community members to share responsibility for educating families about healthy lifestyles;
- ensure that life-long literacy initiatives reflect the uniqueness of communities and meet specific local needs;
- develop provincial standards to ensure consistent quality in early years programs, as well as in initiatives supporting literacy and life-long learning;

- ensure that investments, as well as services, are evidence-based – reflecting the best knowledge available about communities’ needs and children’s development;
- ensure that new initiatives build on the strengths of existing relationships, programs and structures and incorporate lessons learned.

3. Integration

Throughout the consultations, people supported the concept of integrating – and perhaps co-locating – services for young children and their families. Integration was seen as a practical, efficient way to improve access, enhance the value of programs and services, and maximize the use of community and government resources.

Participants made the following suggestions:

- recognize that early learning and childhood development are part of quality child care, learning takes place in a variety of settings: at home, in preschools, in child care, in school and in other community settings;
- continue and strengthen collaboration across ministries, municipalities, school boards and community agencies;
- develop neighbourhood “hubs” where families can access a wide range of services, from public health to child care to parent strengthening, and connect with other resources in their communities;
- consider locating these hubs in publicly-funded spaces such as schools and community centres to provide one-stop, full-service health, education, prevention and intervention programs including child care;
- offer early learning programs in schools to help provide children with a seamless continuum of education experiences; this will help to improve access, make transitions easier and break down barriers that currently exist between programs tailored to meet the needs of children in specific age groups and
- engage community health professionals in providing school-based services such as vision, hearing and dental screening for pre-school as well as school-age children.

4. Sustainability and Growth

Communities want better support to ensure that programs and services are sustainable for the long term and able to accommodate emerging needs.

Child care operating funding was identified as a top priority – it contributes to sustainability by ensuring sufficient financial support to child care providers and assists with the costs of providing quality child care. Capital funding was also discussed and many participants felt it should be linked to established community plans to ensure that new resources are directed to areas of greatest need.

Participants also made the following suggestions:

- provide stable, predictable funding for ongoing initiatives;
- restrict the use of one-time grants to start-up initiatives;
- ensure that all new programs and initiatives have sufficient resources to support human resource management, staff development and information management;
- rather than duplicating programs, build on what is already working well;
- support communities' self-determination; let them set their own priorities, based on existing assets and needs;
- develop local solutions that meet local needs and allow communities to respond as new issues and priorities emerge;
- streamline funding opportunities so communities aren't competing for resources;
- develop integrated service delivery models;
- establish networks and other venues for sharing best practices.

5. Community Planning

British Columbia is a large, diverse province with a wide range of community-specific needs. People who took part in the consultations supported the concepts of localized planning, decision-making, service delivery and accountability to help ensure that programs and services are tailored to the needs of individual communities, neighbourhoods and population groups within them.

Participants made the following suggestions:

- put in place an accountable, credible, planning and development process to identify, assess and respond to communities' needs;
- target funding to local and regional priorities, as identified in community plans;
- build on the sense of shared ownership exemplified in many community initiatives;
- design community development strategies that recognize and build on the interdependence of lifelong learning and economic sustainability;
- develop a coordinated literacy strategy, addressing needs at both the provincial and community levels;
- provide a diverse and comprehensive range of library services to meet the needs of all members, in all communities;
- recognize and address the needs of Aboriginal, refugee, immigrant and second-language learners and
- ensure that the views of all community partners – including families and child care providers – are heard and taken into account.

Conclusion

The consultations conducted during the fall and winter of 2005/06 found the opinions and ideas reflected the diversity of the province. Participants were clearly proud of their communities and firmly committed to working to create the best networks of support for children, families and life-long learners that will meet their communities' own unique and distinct needs

Broadly, there was agreement on the priorities of expanding current services, improving families' access and enhancing service quality. Community planning and service integration were seen as vital strategies in making these improvements and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of services.

Participants identified that the development of quality early learning and child care that is accessible and affordable to all families and that children receive care in safe, stimulating environments that support the child's holistic development is the end goal.

Participants also identified the need for strong accountability – at both the community and provincial levels – to track results, measure progress and provide evidence that British Columbians are benefiting from any investments in these areas.

Government will continue to engage in dialogue and seek feedback from communities. Together, we have a unique opportunity to enhance BC's early learning and child care programs, which will benefit our youngest citizens for years to come. The feedback gathered through these consultations is helping inform our work as we move forward to ensure improved outcomes for BC's children, families and communities. It will also inform the broader work under way throughout BC to achieve the government's Five Great Goals for the future.