

First Call Response to Early Childhood Learning Agency Consultation Paper: *Expanding Early Learning in British Columbia for Children Aged 3-5*

The following response to the questions posed in the above-referenced consultation paper was discussed by the First Call Early Childhood Development Roundtable on July 16, 2008. Thirty-seven people participated in the discussion from provincial and local organizations, including participants from the Lower Mainland, the Interior and the Northern regions. Participants represented 30 different organizations or local planning tables. In addition, input was received before and after the meeting from several other groups who could not be present.

Firstly, there was a strong concern expressed by participants that the timeline given for community input in this consultation was too rushed and therefore missed the opportunity for wide consultations. In addition the consultation came at a time of year when many people were on vacation. Such a significant policy change was felt to be too important to be served by such a poor process, risking insufficient opportunity for proper reflection and thorough discussion.

Preamble

Early childhood advocates have long called for a commitment by the provincial government to universal, quality, publicly-funded and community-based services for young children. If done properly (following the principles and research knowledge referenced in this brief), First Call partners believe that the proposed expansion of kindergarten and pre-kindergarten programming for 3-5 year olds has the potential to serve young children and their families well.

As a coalition which includes both early childhood development and education partners, First Call is happy to assist government and community to work towards cooperative resolution of the many important issues and challenges raised by this proposed program expansion and policy change. **We are particularly interested in strengthening the shared understanding that care and education are not separate concepts and that quality child care programs for young children provide both.**

In responding to this call for comment, First Call looked first to the consensus already built within the early childhood field in BC in developing our publication, “*Early Childhood Development in BC: First Call’s Framework for Action*” (2003) (See <http://www.firstcallbc.org/pdfs/EarlyChildhood/1-framework%202008.pdf>) This document sets out the characteristics of high quality care and early learning programs that:

- *Provide children with caring, consistent, enriched, play-based settings where they can discover, explore, create, problem-solve and connect with other children and adults outside their family circle.*
- *Provide additional opportunities for the early identification of developmental delays, disabilities and/or other risk factors and appropriate referrals.*
- *Enhance parents’ understanding of child development through information, support and role modelling.*

- *Build supportive social networks amongst children and families, including intergenerational and cross-cultural involvement to encourage a strong sense of community.*
- *Support and enhance the economic security of women and families.*
- *Include a comprehensive range of affordable full-time, part-time and/or 'flexible hours' programs that are:*
 - *intentionally planned to meet the longitudinal developmental needs of each child within a group setting and during key transitions such as school entry;*
 - *language/literacy enriched;*
 - *culturally sensitive;*
 - *inclusive.*

The programs must:

- *reflect the characteristics associated with high quality;*
- *encourage parent participation and strengthen the 'shared caring' partnership;*
- *meet the needs of all children regardless of whether their parents are working, studying, involved in the voluntary sector or at home.*

These characteristics are all relevant to the proposed expansion of early childhood care and education programming in BC. They are also congruent with the research evidence referenced in the consultation paper about the benefits of young children's participation in high quality early childhood programs, and full-day kindergarten and the international trend to recognize children's entitlement to quality programming in their early years.

Response Form: Part One

Given the importance of the early childhood years and the clear trends to increase and improve programs in other jurisdictions, the Early Childhood Learning Agency invites your response to the following questions.

1. What are your thoughts on full school day kindergarten for five-year-olds?

The limitation of full-day kindergarten to a targeted population of children has had some disastrous consequences in practice for children and school communities. These consequences include segregation by ability and ethnicity of children at the start of their school careers, meaning friendships with their half-day kindergarten peers were not enabled, inclusion goals for children with special needs were undermined, and ESL children were clustered to the detriment of their English language exposure. Many children living in poverty who would certainly benefit from FDK were excluded from the program, including children whose special needs were unidentified upon school entry.

From this experience, and from listening to the expressed views of many parents, teachers and school trustees on this subject, First Call believes universal FDK for 5 year olds should be offered as an option, free of charge, to all families.

While 5 year olds have long been defined in BC legislation as of "school-age", the principles articulated in the *British Columbia Early Learning Framework* about the importance of relationships, play-based and stimulating learning environments, respect for children's views and for their individual, cultural and linguistic identities, among others, should inform the program's development.

For working parents, the need for child care outside of school hours must be addressed, recognizing the importance of an integrated learning and care environment in one location for young children as the ideal.

2. & 3. What about parent choice for full-school-day pre-kindergarten programs for three and four-year olds?

To quote from BC's Early Learning Framework, *"Most of children's early learning takes place through play. Play is so important that its significance in children's lives is recognized by the United Nations as a specific right in addition to the right to recreation and leisure."*

Programming for 3 and 4 year old children in school and community settings should include half-day participation as an option.

The Consultation Paper and the First Call ECD Framework for Action document both note the key elements of quality that we believe must be part of BC's approach to any expansion of programs for 3-4 year olds. These are:

- a) A commitment to **inclusive, play-based, developmentally-appropriate** programs that support the optimal healthy growth and development of all children.
- b) A commitment to employ and adequately compensate **qualified staff with expertise in early childhood care and education.**
- c) A commitment to **meet the needs of working families** through programs that integrate learning and care in a seamless day at one location.
- d) A commitment to **universal access for all families, including affordability, through public funding of school-based and community-based¹ programming options.**
- e) A commitment to **include parents as knowledgeable partners** in a 'shared caring' relationship with service providers.
- f) A commitment to ensuring that **current child care licensing ratio and space requirements for 3 and 4 year olds are met in any school-based programs.**

4. What do you think are the most important factors to consider in expanding early learning programs in British Columbia?

- ◆ **Ensure appropriate early childhood pedagogy and avoid pushing down elementary school curriculum into these early years.** First Call ECD Roundtable participants were unanimous in expressing opposition to any imposition of primary school curriculum, expected "learning outcomes" or "school-like" environment on preschool children.
- ◆ **Learning and care go together.** For young children, learning occurs in the context of nurturing relationships that support holistic development. The ability to provide consistent, caring relationships in safe and stimulating environments must be at the core of sound early childhood policy and programs. If the Ministry of Education has a mandate for programs for young children, they need to accept responsibility for 'care and learning' because you can't have one without the other. New models must recognize that community-based programs and schools are equal partners in the provision of early childhood services and family supports.

¹ Here and in subsequent usages, "community-based" is meant to refer to programs and services that are operated outside of a school setting, usually by a non-profit organization or voluntary association.

- ◆ **Aboriginal language and culture.** Given the history of distrust of the public school system within Aboriginal communities due to the legacy of residential schools and other forms of discrimination; any expanded programs for Aboriginal children must address the language and cultural needs that early year's programs such as Aboriginal Head Start, and other community-developed Aboriginal early learning and care programs, currently provide.
- ◆ **A new policy entitlement for young children.** Current public policy gives older children an entitlement to attend a free, public school program for a "full school day" of approximately 30 hours per week, including lunch hour. Extending this same entitlement to 3 to 5 year olds, as an option for families, would, of course, require new public policy and planning for sufficient staffing for the more intensive care needs of young children throughout the school day. Schools providing expanded programming would also need to have a plan in place to meet children's learning and care needs beyond 30 hours in order for that children experience a truly seamless day without disruption in the caring relationships they establish with adults.
- ◆ **Respect the needs of working families.** The majority of BC mothers with young children work or study outside the home. Provincial policy classifies parents on income assistance as employable and required to look for work as soon as their youngest child turns three. Any new policy and program direction for young children must be designed to provide stable, fully-integrated, quality care and early learning environments for the children of working parents. Following the New Zealand model, families would be able to access their 30 hours or less of publicly funded early learning and care in a school-based 'K' setting or in a quality community-based child care program. Those requiring more than 30 hours a week of learning and care would still pay for additional hours, with continued public support for those who can't afford fees.
- ◆ **Pay attention to the broader support needs of families, particularly those living in poverty.** Roundtable participants highlighted the importance of early childhood programming maintaining or building in connections for families with a range of community services and supports. They referenced how existing community-based programs help families with food security needs and in dealing with crisis situations. There were concerns expressed that the consultation paper is narrowly focused on learning programs for the child, with insufficient regard for a holistic approach to the child as part of a family, and the documented importance of parental involvement in the early years.
- ◆ **Build on the strengths of existing early learning and care programs in schools and community settings by investing new public funding in both.** This will maximize prior government and community investments in both program capacity and infrastructure. There is widespread anxiety that this policy shift risks destabilizing existing early childhood programs, including child care, family resource programs and other community-based family support programs and services. The fear is that these programs will lose already scarce funding to the education system. An additional concern was expressed that boards of education would be expected to stretch already scarce K-12 funding even further to cover early learning programming.
- ◆ **Ensure that children with extra support needs are fully included.** Given that services for children with special needs in the K-12 education system have suffered consistent funding cuts over the years, and that supported child development services are insufficient in all communities, there is fear that new programming will not provide adequately funded assessment and support services to ensure full inclusion. If done well, new universal, optional, programming for 3-4 year olds creates an opportunity for more seamless transitions from early years programs to primary school for children with identified extra support needs. This seamless approach should apply to children regardless of the physical venue of the program, i.e. school- or community-based.

- ◆ **Ensure accountability for public funds.** Early learning and care programs receiving public funds should be community owned and democratically controlled, whether based in a community or a school setting. This ensures greater accountability and community involvement in service planning and governance structures.
- ◆ **Address staff recruitment and retention issues.** Qualified early childhood educators, with appropriate post secondary training, are essential to the successful expansion of programs for 3-5 year olds. This means expansion of early learning and care programming will need to address the current crisis in recruitment and retention in the field resulting from low wages and lack of appreciation for the value of the work they do. The possible expansion of programs for 3-5 year olds provides an opportunity to address this crisis by moving towards parity in both credentialing of and working conditions for early childhood educators and primary teachers. This would require a long-term strategic plan that addresses the education and training needs of early childhood educators within the present college system. The precedent of StrongStart staff having already been hired as members of support workers' unions was raised, and so careful thought must be given to the long term goal of achieving parity for early childhood educators with primary teachers.
- ◆ **“Extend the values and principles of public education systems to all ECEC services (for example, that it is a public good); organize a single structural framework including funding, workforce and regulation to replace dual care/education structures; develop an integrative concept encompassing not only learning but also care and well-being of young children, enabling policy and practice to move beyond ‘early education’ and ‘childcare’ as separate entities.”** Bennet, J & Moss, P. (2006). *Toward a new pedagogical meeting place? Bringing early childhood into the education system.* London: Nuffield Foundation

Response Form: Part Two

Please provide the following information about yourself and/or your organization. This will help ensure that the government hears from a wide range of individuals and groups. To help us understand your perspective on the issues, please check the box that best describes you.

I am responding on behalf of an organization.

If you checked the last box, please provide the name of your organization:

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition

You do not have to provide your name, but you may do so if you wish:

Adrienne Montani, Provincial Coordinator

Please submit your comments by July 18, 2008.

Submitted by e-mail to: EDUC.earlylearning@gov.bc.ca

First Call is a non-partisan, province-wide coalition of individuals and organizations who come together to create greater understanding of and advocacy for legislation, policy, and practice to ensure that all children and youth have the opportunities and resources required to achieve their full potential and to participate in the challenges of creating a better society.

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