

Family Supports Institute Ontario response to:

Building a Better Future: A Discussion Paper for Transforming the Early Years in Ontario.

The Family Supports Institute Ontario is writing in response to the recently released discussion paper on Building a Better Future: A Discussion Paper for Transforming the Early Years in Ontario. As shared with you and your staff on November 30th at our Annual General Meeting, we want to commend the Government on its intent to bring together this disparate, fragmented set of services, resources and programs to better serve the needs of families with young children across Ontario.

As was discussed, services have emerged over the past fifty years primarily as women's roles in society have changed and traditional systems of support have declined. To date, family support programs (CCRCs, OEYC, PFLC, BBBFs) have not fit neatly into any policy framework, so we applaud your efforts to define and rationalize such services under the early years and child care policy framework and to make them available to all families.

The discussion paper indicates that up to 50% of children birth to age four require "formal" child care. Given the birth rate in Ontario of over 140,000 children each year, this would suggest that perhaps up to 280,000 children birth to age four are in licensed childcare. The remaining 50% are in the care of their parents, relatives, babysitters, nannies or in the "informal" home child care sector. Our feedback concerns such services that are available to the "other 50%" who may be benefiting from access to other types of high quality, informed learning environments such as OEYCs FRPs, PFLCs and BBBFs.

The Board of the Family Supports Institute Ontario offers the following reflective comments which we hope will inform the development of the Province's renewed early years and child care policy framework. These comments are provided in addition to the matters that were discussed during the community consultation which took place on November 30, 2016 at FSIO's Annual General Meeting in Toronto.

- The discussion document identifies three areas of interest (p.2) of which we would suggest that "Health and Wellbeing" is most important. Similarly, of the four identified pillars (p.10) we suggest that "responsiveness to needs of families and children through early years programs and child care in schools, communities, workplaces, and at home" should take precedence over all other considerations.
- The needs that bring families to seek out family support programs or child and family centres are fundamentally different from those of other services such as child care. The

Government should not confuse the value of services to families at the point that they need them, with their relatively inexpensive cost of service delivery. FSIO would suggest that an evaluative research component be included in the policy framework to assist in understanding this relationship.

- The approximately \$100M currently invested in child and family centres may not be sufficient to achieve the goal of equitable access across the province. Further, this funding does not cover the true cost of service delivery, the inequities in staffing and staff salaries, and does not in any way address the needs of underserved or isolated communities where there may be no service at all. In addition, many programs are unable to fully respond to increased demands for service due to funding limitations. As the Government of Canada moves to complete the proposed multilateral framework agreement on early learning and child care, FSIO urges the Ministry of Education to consider investing a portion of additional funds that may become available to child and family centres.
- Based on our collective experience, the most effective staff teams are both interdisciplinary as well as able to engage not only the child, but even more importantly, the “adult carer” (Clinton, 2016). With the secure engagement of the adult in the family support program, well-being is augmented and this puts into motion a very positive trajectory for the child and for the parent-child relationship. This has been shown to contribute to life-long health and wellbeing. Training and education in Family Supports, which includes an adult education component, prepares and enables staff to engage “adult carers” and meets the challenge of fostering an empowering environment in the child and family centre. This phenomenon, together with specialist training in early education, provides the alchemy of success for families that practitioners have the privilege of observing on a regular basis. FSIO recommends that this be considered when defining staffing requirements. Further, FSIO urges the Ministry of Education to consider the development of a provincially defined orientation and training approach to be included in the implementation framework. FSIO is currently working to identify core training modules for family support staff in collaboration with Ryerson University. Given FSIO’s commitment to building capacity in the family support sector, we would be pleased to assist in the development of a learning strategy and its delivery at the provincial level.
- FSIO also recognizes the need to ensure that families and children with disabilities have access to an equitable system of services similar to that available to children in the licensed child care sector. Although referrals to external services can be one component of this service delivery system, it can be a support that only serves to compound the stress that families face when they have a child or children with extraordinary needs. Families need supports **within** the child and family program where services are brought **to** the family. FSIO urges the Ministry of Education to provide specific direction to CMSMs and DSSABs to create a service system plan for children utilizing child and family centres across Ontario.

- FSIO is aware of the "Schools First" policy and acknowledges the benefits in utilizing school spaces in some communities, however, we would also like to bring attention to the fact that, needs of families can also be met in community-based settings where many families find greater comfort and ease of access. FSIO urges the Ministry of Education to take this into account and to provide guidance to CMSMs and DSSABs in this respect as they determine strategic locations and develop implementation plans for child and family centres.
- Finally, FSIO respectfully suggests that communication and consultations continue to be a key strategy in this transformation with ongoing discussions, defining what an "integrated system" means, clarifying the municipal role, and how the vision is to be implemented in a consistent and equitable way across the province. Keeping everyone well informed and active in the process, is key to the success of this transformation. We anticipate that the proposed "branding" exercise may help as this initiative is rolled out and another opportunity to engage the sector.

References:

Clinton, J. (2016). "Power of Connection". Notes and Reflections from December 14, 2016 Jean Clinton's keynote address at the Children's Planning Table Forum of Waterloo Region.