



Family Support
Institute Ontario

Advancing the well being of families

Framing the Debate:

**A Position Paper with a Focus on Parent
Engagement**

**Asking Tough Questions about the Ontario
Plan for Early Learning and Care**

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Framing the Debate: What the Pascal Vision means to Family Support Programs?

Family Supports Institute Ontario (FSIO) embraces the full implementation of the *With Our Best Future in Mind* released by Dr. Charles Pascal and the Premier of Ontario in June 2009.

The mission of Family Supports Institute Ontario is to enhance the well being of families as seen through the lens of the *Guiding Principles of Family Support* (FRP Canada, 2000)¹. Our mission will be accomplished through Innovative Research, Public Policy Dialogue, Capacity Building and Parent Engagement.

Our members include professionals working in Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, Family Resource Programs, Ontario Early Years Centres, CAP-C/CPNP programs, individual family support practitioners and academics.

This paper is a result of collaborative discussions with our membership and board of directors and is intended to provide a foundation for future dialogue with the early learning and care sector in the Province of Ontario.

Children live in families, families live in neighbourhoods and community is created based on families' experiences in their neighbourhoods. It can be argued that a child's first and most influential context is its immediate family relationships. The next most influential relationship is the child's immediate neighbourhood and community. Children encounter their community through early learning and care programs, schools, churches, parks, and libraries to name a few. These programs are the skeleton on which the entire person or citizen is enacted. This means that all of those intersections that a child encounters with its family and later as an individual, need to be of excellent quality, plentiful, well-resourced and reflective of communal values and relationships. Diversity of programs and relationships enables a family to benefit from a wide range of choices and values in a given community. When there are too few choices, or programs are under-resourced, families may encounter higher incidences of isolation, and children find a limited view of the world around them and fewer caring, capacity-building opportunities.

The report released in June 2009 by Dr. Pascal has created a flurry of excitement in the education community, as well as in the early learning and care sector. Multiple levels of municipal and provincial government are undergoing enormous transitions to engage and enact the implementation of the portions of the report that the McGuinty Government has adopted. The report encompassed the entire range of services for children and families 0-12 across the province, and proposed radically different funding structures, organizational structures and

implementation models than have been used in the past. The ultimate goal of this reorganization is to provide more streamlined services for parents, to make better use of public dollars and to prepare our children for the knowledge economy. Those working in the early learning and care sector have demanded change to this system that serves and meets the needs of families and children. Dr. Pascal has successfully made all the recommendations that would bring about the necessary changes and create a cohesive and comprehensive system of early learning and care. Fully implemented, families and children would have a system that is multidirectional and supports a firm foundation of high quality, affordable, accessible services which would be made available to all families across the province of Ontario.

In October 2009, those working in the early learning and care sectors, as well as parents, looked forward to the McGuinty government's announcement regarding the implementation of the plan, *With our Best Future in Mind*. Unfortunately, Premier McGuinty announced the implementation of only one fifth of recommendations: Full-day Early Learning for four and five year olds phased in over a 5 year period. Not surprisingly, a "phased in" approach has many implications. This includes what has been referred to by many childcare advocates as the "catastrophic collapse" of community child care programs unable to weather the transition. The loss of 120,000 four and five year old children moving into the education system results in a significant loss of revenue. Although we commend the Provincial Government's decision to replace the withdrawn Federal Government's \$63.5 million dollars that was allocated to Best Start it is debateable whether it will be enough to actually stabilize this fragile system of childcare.

The Full-Day Early Learning program has innumerable decisions attached to it. Ministries, boards, municipalities and unions are all struggling to understand the wide range of implications related to implementation of a full-day program for 3.8 to 5 year olds with a redesigned staff team and in space not receiving capital dollars until phase 2. The program is as yet undeveloped; the unions have expressed concerns about wages, work days, working environments and breaks, while the newly recognized Early Childhood Educators are unclear about their role in the new educational team. It is now April, and in 5 short months the first 15% of the entire province's JK and SK students will walk through the doors of a brand new program, with new staff responsibilities and new relationships waiting to be matured.

As important as these concerns are the questions and concerns of FSIO members have not been particularly directed at the program, staffing models and implementation planning or space issues. Our members and the larger Family support sector are concerned with a much more important question:

How will the early learning sector effectively engage parents in this new system?

Where are parents' voices, expertise and experience?

Professor Debbie Pushor from the University of Saskatchewan, wrote a groundbreaking paper for the Ontario Education Research Symposium in 2007, challenging the notions of parent involvement, parent engagement and our understanding of those terms in different contexts, education vs. community programs.

While it is important to engage parents on the school landscape, it is equally important for educators to move comfortably in the worlds of families and communities, off the school landscape.” (Pushor, 2007, p. 6)

She was successful in illustrating that education has a century of history, tradition and hierarchy attached to it, and community programs, which tend to be enacted at grass-roots level, better reflect true parental or familial connections. She discusses the needs of families to be more than consumers of direction on how to educate their children, and other authors have expanded on the success of validating a child’s first context, their family, in an educational setting.

Living the story of parent engagement, then, means living out a new story of school. A world which is co-constructed and shared with parents and community members is a world with a side-by-side structure rather than a hierarchical one...What is important in this new story is that parents have a place and voice in the core work of the school—that of teaching and learning. (Pushor, 2007, p. 8)

In 2005 research, directed by a team of professionals from Ryerson University and partnering with the Metro Association of Family Resource Programs and HRSDC was undertaken to understand what participants of community-based grass-roots programs had to say about why these programs were so valuable. What resulted was an understanding that, throughout families’ growth, despite their income level, and across cultural and ethnic boundaries, families need programs that embrace them as parents, as thinking, breathing, engaging actors in developing their skills and abilities as parents, and community members. Trusting, secure relationships enable parents to learn new skills, check in that their children are okay, understand other parents’ concerns and learn the importance of social inclusion both for themselves and their children.

Family support programs not only reduce the incidence of child abuse, pass on valuable skills and knowledge, and provide resources on a daily basis to families, they also create that centrally located network of relationships that build community capacity to care for and encourage active citizens.

There is no shortage of literature, research and practical expertise that can support the efforts of policy makers and professionals working in the early learning and care sector, as we venture on this new path and create a system that is the envy of the world.

Why are Family Support Practitioners concerned about the effect of full-day early learning?

Many inequities have been created by the “phase-in” process of the full-day plan despite the fact that the Pascal vision has at its very heart equity and access for diverse populations. All parents want the best for their children, and as stated before, messaging the importance of the early years has been very successful

- **How many families are being asked to wait to secure better future outcomes for their kids if they are not in a full-day program in September 2010?**
- **What role do family support programs play in filling the gaps left by children who aren’t in the full day schools?**
- **How will that impact the family support programs in communities? Will demands for similar curriculum be made at community-based programs with differing philosophies?**

- **Will there be more funding made available to enhance programs at a community level until the “phase-in” is complete in 2015, and, if community programs are responsible for the families that can’t access the full-day program, how do their staff respond to increased demands for structured early learning and increased demands just on levels of service?**

Dr. Pascal discusses the importance of parent engagement and highlights the experiences and challenges that families currently face in participating in a holistic manner in their community schools.

“If our goal is to increase parent engagement, we need to be thoughtful about who is included in the process.... Additional effort has to be made to support and engage these parents. Locating Best Start Child and Family Centres in schools will help to link parents to the school, as well as to parenting, family counselling and other supports.”
(Pascal, 2009, p.31)

How can family support practitioners work with the governments and community partners to engage parents and families and help create the Child and Family Centres?

Family Support Practitioners come from a variety of backgrounds including Social Work, Child and Youth Work, ECE, Education and Psychology. In addition many experienced Family Support Practitioners come with the knowledge and resources to support teachers, ECE’s and other staff in creating a truly engaged school community - a community that views parents as assets to their program, and true participants in the development of students as active participants in their community.

Although Canada is currently last in the OECD rating of early learning and care for our youngest citizens, we have an enviable social safety net, and are moving in the right direction to provide the best possible start for our children to grow and develop in a manner that creates responsible and contributing global citizens.

We must do this in a thoughtful, well-resourced and reciprocal manner, ensuring practices that work for *systems* as well as *families and communities* and understanding and engaging families in a way that is meaningful and comprehensive.

Family Support Programs have the research, we understand the process, and we have been able to enact grass-roots, reciprocal community-based programs for the last 40 years across Canada.

What Family Support Programs are asking is to be involved in designing the Best Start Child and Family Centres and be complicit in developing a system of early learning and care that is flexible, responsive and inclusive.

References

1. Guiding Principles of Family Support, Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, (2000) available at www.frp.ca/KeyDocuments
2. Pushor, D. (2007). *Parent Engagement: Creating a Shared World*. Invited Research paper: Ontario Education Research Symposium, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK.
3. Pascal, C. (2009). *With our best future in mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*. Ontario: Queens Printer