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Ministry of Education

Toronto, Ontario

**RE: NEW RECE REQUIREMENT AND OTHER FAMILY SUPPORT FACTORS IN**

***EarlyON Child and Family Centres***

***Issue***

As of January 1, 2018, every EarlyON Child and Family Centre (EarlyON CFC) must have at least one Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE) to deliver mandatory core services for early learning and development. **As one of the** new requirements established by *The Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centres Business Practices and Funding Guidelines for Service System Managers (2017)* the Family Supports Institute of Ontario (FSIO) agrees that RECEs are important for children’s development. However, it is vital to bear in mind that EarlyON CFCs are family support programs intended to support not only children but also adults in equal measure**. Under the new guidelines, Family Support Workers who are not RECEs but have other multidisciplinary training and education are not treated as equals. As a result, non-RECE family support workers are devalued and Family Support programs like EarlyON CFCs are shifting their focus from supporting child and family outcomes to focus exclusively on child development outcomes.**

***Current Status***

With the release of the above-noted guidelines and *Ontario’s Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework (2017),* the groundwork has been laid for modernizing and transforming the childcare and early years’ sector in Ontario and has included the amalgamation of the existing family support programs into the new EarlyON Child and Family Centres. Service System Managers are required to ensure that qualified staff teams include at least one RECE to deliver early learning core services at all times. However, Service System Managers **“may”** exempt staff/programs for up to five years from achieving compliance with this requirement. These guidelines also recommend that all staff working at EarlyON CFCs qualify as RECEs.

***Key Considerations***

1. **Multidisciplinary staff team - Equitable recognition**

EarlyON Child & Family Centres - previously called Child Care Resource Centres/Family Resource Centres - are programs that date back to the late 1970s and had an empowerment model where program participants were heavily involved in determining their service needs, and as a result frequently moved on to become employed as staff, that is, Family Support Workers. Qualified staff, (non-ECEs), especially those employed before 2000, were valued for their years of hands-on experience, skills and knowledge needed to work with families and children as well as their **professional designations as social workers, educators, family supports practitioners, mental health providers, community development workers, etc.** FSIO fully supports the need for RECEs who have the skills and competencies to work with children and create learning environments that will result in the best outcomes for children, however, it is just as important to have the skills and competencies to work with parents/caregivers in EarlyON programs. It is also important to highlight the uniqueness of the EarlyON CFC setting as compared to the other early learning and care settings such as centre and home-based child care and Full Day Kindergarten where the focus is primarily on the care and education of the child. EarlyON CFCs are an essential component of building the social fabric of a healthy community. They contribute directly to increasing social capital and cohesion and reducing social isolation and consequently produce positive outcomes across generations and improve the quality of life in the communities that they serve. EarlyON CFC are required to support the learning and positive outcomes for both adult and child. Consequently, this requires a dual set of skills and competencies. While new ECE graduates may have the qualifications needed to work in EarlyON CFCs and implement How Does Learning Happen, they may lack the work experience needed to support families and work with parents and caregivers. In a recent study of pre-service and experienced Early Childhood Educators, Winder (2014) conducted a survey to investigate what attracted them to the field. The category of “to support families” came out at the very bottom of the list. Only 3% of respondents out of a cohort of 30 reported that this is why they were attracted to the field. Further, Winder (2014) found that it is a common fallacy to believe that ECE graduates are equipped and interested in engaging with parents. Their expertise, without further training is solely on the education of young children (Winder, 2014).

In the EarlyON CFC setting the need for multidisciplinary teams is not just a “nice to have” but a “must have” in order for the EarlyON CFCs to fulfill their potential. Multidisciplinary teams must be recognized as a necessity in order to achieve positive outcomes for child and family. Promoting multidisciplinary staff and validating other skill sets will improve employee standards, as emphasized in the Ministry of Education’s *Growing Together: Ontario’s Early Years and Child Care Workforce Strategy*: “Expanding professional standards to the entire sector rather than just to RECE’s will help to promote the professional identity of the sector and of those working in the sector. Improved oversight – through broadened scope of the College of Early Childhood Educators to include all employees in the sector – will ensure that all employees are accountable for adhering to standards and codes of conduct that are professionally overseen and regulated” (p.18).

1. **Impediments to compliance**

Time commitment is just one of the impediments to completion of an ECE diploma for non RECE staff. Others include: shouldering family responsibilities, the uncertainty of finding work after studies, likelihood of losing their position and seniority while studying, and income loss if school requires taking unpaid leave from work. Given these challenges, most staff will be hard-pressed to complete the courses within the five-year timeline. An ECE diploma from a Community College necessitates approximately 26-29 college courses/placements. To finish a diploma in five years requires closer to six courses/placements per year, or an average of two courses per semester over a five-year period. As each course requires at least three hours per week in class and three hours of study, this totals 12 hours a week - in addition to a fulltime job. FSIO is concerned about the undue pressure on staff to come into compliance. According to Growing Together: Ontario’s Early Years and Child Care Workforce Strategy, 2018: “Supporting the workforce is an important part of the governments overall vision for the early years and child care” (p.6). It is important to build some flexibility into a system that is already overly stressed.

**Will all agencies get the five-year exemption period? Will agencies be forced to lay off or terminate staff that are unable to finish the diploma in five years?****Does squeezing Family Support Workers out of their jobs constitute caring and supporting their employees?**

1. **Administrative and Financial Burden**

Many EarlyON CFCs are already looking for ways to ensure that their programs have an RECE to operate core services. Program providers are already worrying about the day the RECE is sick or on vacation. How will agencies afford to hire additional RECEs during sick leave or vacation time? Managers have already expressed an inclination to hire only RECEs now in order to avoid this problem – this is to the exclusion of other qualified and experienced staff needed to achieve a balance among staff, bearing in mind the necessary equal focus on parents. **The new RECE requirement puts undue burden on organizations and agencies that operate EarlyON CFCs and has already resulted in the termination of some current non-RECE staff.**

1. **Child and Family Outcomes - Dual nature of the work**

Research shows that parents receiving support and resources will feel better about themselves and their parenting abilities and, in turn, interact better with their children. As Carl Dunst renowned, early childhood researcher writes: “Enhancing and strengthening parenting capacity and the social and emotional development of young children are important outcomes of community-based parenting programs” (Trivette & Dunst,. 2014). It is important to note that in many jurisdictions beyond Ontario notably Belgium, German, France and Sweden are scaling up their early years programs by strengthening their family support components and facilitating the convergence of professional knowledge beyond simply child development to attend to and enable wellbeing for parents and caregivers (Eurochild, 2012). Similarly, in the United States the *Two Generation Approach* is gaining widespread traction in its social programs as policy makers insist on a dual focus to create opportunities for and to address the needs of both children and the adults who care for them (Schmit, Matthews, and Golden, 2016) In this transitional year, and with the change in Provincial government, is it still possible for Ontario to steer away from a sole focus on the child and reinstate its commitment towards a dual focus on child and parent and thereby harness the inherent potential of its EarlyON programs as places that truly enhance the **wellbeing of the family**?

***The Family Supports Institute Ontario respectfully submits the following recommendations for your consideration:***

1. ***FSIO recommends that* Family Support Workers with multidisciplinary education (minimum two year post secondary) and skills should be recognized as providers of a service equal in importance and benefit to that of RECEs. In recognition of their importance, these employees should be permitted to work in equal partnership with an RECE and continue to represent the staff in early learning and development services even when the RECE is unavailable (e.g., due to vacation, illness, attending workshop).**

**Staffing model** we recommend in each EarlyON centre**: one FTE RECE Facilitator and one FTE qualified Family Support Facilitator (such as social workers, educators, mental health providers, community development workers, etc.) where both staff are equally valued.**

In addition, by recognizing the uniqueness of their work role, we propose a unified job title, **“*Family Supports Professional”.*** Staff who are also RECEs may be differentiated by adding this qualification to their job title (i.e. *Family Supports Professional – RECE*).

1. ***FSIO recommends that* work experience and prior education of non-ECEs working in EarlyON CFCs are recognized when determining course requirements needed to obtain an RECE designation. Enable Community Colleges to set criteria for ECE course exemptions for current non-ECE staff affected by the new guidelines and who wish to become ECEs.** Further, we urge that all prior education be taken into account regardless of when it was completed.

1. ***FSIO recommends that*  special recognition is given to non-RECE staff who have more than 15 years of work experience in EarlyON CFCs and who are close to retirement (55 years of age or older). These longtime employees should be “grandfathered” (and equally valued as RECEs) and exempted from the requirement to obtain their RECE designation in order to be gainfully employed.**  However, these staff must continue to participate in ongoing professional development to strengthen their work with children and families.
2. ***FSIO recommends that, where needed,* longer exemption periods be given to EarlyONs (that do not have one RECE on staff) where staff are studying towards completing their ECE. Municipalities should be given authority to provide longer exemption which will also help solve the “significant recruitment and retention issues” in the early years’ workforce sector (Growing Together: Ontario’s Early Years and Child Care Workforce Strategy, 2018, p.20). All non-ECE staff hired before January 2018 (other than those referred to in the preceding paragraph) who wish to qualify as ECEs should be immune from dismissal while they complete their ECE training.**

In our past written communication and through our participation in various consultations advisories, we have provided you with our views on the unique nature of EarlyON Child and Family Centres, core values, professional development needs and opportunities, community impacts, service integration and the equitable treatment of Family Support Professionals. We welcome the opportunity to discuss our concerns and work together to transform the early learning and care sector to achieve positive outcomes for children and families in Ontario.

Respectfully,

The Family Supports Institute of Ontario

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