**Family Supports in Ontario: Finding our Voice**

By Chanel Tsang

May 22, 2019

After two years of advocacy efforts, including hours of writing, meetings and discussion with the Ministry of Education’s Early Years and Child Care Division, the Family Supports Institute Ontario (FSIO) is heartened that this Ministry team took our concerns about the state of family supports and the new EarlyON Child and Family Centres seriously, which is reflected in a recent provincial memo.

On April 18, 2019, the Ministry of Education, Early Years and Child Care Division released a memo to the Chief Administrative Officers, CMSMs, DSSABs, Directors, and General Managers entitled [*2019 Early Years and Child Care Allocations*](https://efis.fma.csc.gov.on.ca/faab/Memos/CC2019/EYCC02_EN.pdf), an update on funding for the early years and child care sectors, including EarlyON Child and Family Centres. **The memo included positive changes to the EarlyON staffing requirements and respite care in EarlyON**,both for which FSIO had been advocating.

In response to the Ministry of Education document *The Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centres Business Practices and Funding Guidelines for Service System Managers* (2017), FSIO immediately started an advocacy campaign (which led to the creation of our Advocacy Committee) to ensure that family supports remains a core component of EarlyON programs. This included writing response letters and a policy brief to, and meeting with, Shannon Fuller, Assistant Deputy Minister, Early Years Division, Ministry of Education, as well as facilitating a consultation by the Ministry with our members and family supports practioners in Ontario. Read our policy brief [here.](http://fsio.ca/new-rece-requirement-and-other-family-suport-factors/)

2019 Changes to EarlyON Staffing Requirements and Respite Care:

Family support programs have historically employed qualified staff teams with multidisciplinary training, education and experience, including but not always early childhood education. FSIO advocated to recognize that diversity in staff teams must be preserved in order to maintain the integrity and purpose of family support programs such as EarlyON Centres. We also asked for long-term staff to be exempted from this ECE requirement provided that they have relevant, practical experience working with children and families and with the understanding that ongoing professional development is necessary to ensure quality of practice.

**Change #1: A grandparent provision that allows staff who have worked in the following programs for at least ten years exemption from the ECE requirement and the ability to fulfill the RECE requirement for their EarlyON Centre: Ontario Early Years Centres, Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, Child Resource Centres, Better Beginnings, Better Futures.**

FSIO members offering much needed respite care for families in stress or crisis in their family support programs started a petition for approval to continue to offer this necessary service and for the Ministry of Education to continue this funding after 2018.

**Change #2: Effective immediately, CMSMs/DSSABs have the option of continuing to work with EarlyON service providers to offer respite child care and provide funding for the selected locations based on local service plans and community needs.**

EarlyON staff teams are now required to include at least one Registered Early Childhood Educator to deliver mandatory core services related to early learning and development. This requirement was given a three-year transition period. FSIO advocated for longer timelines and financial supports to meet this condition.

**Change #3: In the April 2019 memo, the Ministry of Education extended the timeline for non-ECE staff members (per centre) to become an ECE from three years to five years. (All EarlyON Centres must have a staff fulfilling the RECE requirement by January 1, 2023.)**

Overall, this is an advocacy win for family supports! But even we celebrate this success, we can’t stop now. Right now, many of us are seriously concerned about changes that are happening in Ontario, including in the child care, public education and health sectors. In recent months, we have seen thousands of people across the province unite to speak up and stand together to support their beliefs and each other. FSIO will continue to use our voice to ensure that the families in Ontario have the supports that they need.

“It’s important to remember that we can have impact. Our voices can be heard even from grassroot level. Decisions that are made above us are not always set in stone; by voicing our opinions, we have the power to give input and necessary changes can happen,” says Cecilia Nisell, FSIO Board Member and Chair of the Advocacy Committee.

FSIO has a long history rooted in advocacy. Family supports began as a grassroots movement in the 1970s with parents, caregivers, and practitioners organizing and starting up programs where families with infants and young children could meet to find support in each other as well as parenting and other family support resources in the community. More about the history of family supports in Ontario can be found [here](https://fsio.ca/history/).

How to get more involved:

* First, share this post!
* Consider [joining FSIO](https://fsio.ca/membership/) to help our advocacy and professional learning efforts for our sector. You can sign up as an individual or as an organization.
* Already a member? Sign up to join our Advocacy Committee or another committee that strikes your passion.
* [Sign up for our free e-blast](https://fsio.us3.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=5eb2bd80577265408672efeb3&id=d356f0170b) to keep up-to-date on current news, practice, and policy in the Early Years and Family Supports sectors.
* Take time to explain to your family and friends exactly what you do, no matter how many times it takes!
* [Invite your MPP](https://www.ola.org/en/members/current) to your program so that they can experience and understand its value in their community.
* Develop your “elevator pitch” (or your Tweet-length explanation) of family support.
* Keep talking about it until the terms *Family Supports* and *Family Supports Practioner* becomes common knowledge.
* Get involved and educate yourself on the budget cuts and changes that are impacting the quality and access to services that families rely on. For example, [AECEO](https://www.aeceo.ca/) advocates for ECEs and child care, while [People for Education](https://peopleforeducation.ca/) provides evidence and resources on public education.

FSIO will continue advocating for family supports to make sure that all families in Ontario have access and receive the supports they want and need. We are the only organization in Ontario that advocates for family support practioners, including EarlyON staff, and we will keep doing so. Will you do the same?

#fsmatters #familysupport #thisisfamilysupport