

BRIEF: EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE CONSULTATION

**SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND
COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**BERNARD RICHARD, OMBUDSMAN AND CHILD AND YOUTH
ADVOCATE
JUNE 27, 2007**

“... if we truly wish to provide our children with an equal opportunity to maximize their potential, whatever that might be, it is vital that we do everything we can to enhance their early development. But we no longer have the luxury of indulging in philosophical debates about what sort of society we wish to become. We are now confronted with the issue of survival. If our children are to acquire the skills they will need to cope with the daunting challenges they will face in the 21st century, we need to recognize the paramount importance of investing heavily in their early years of development. It is not their genes but our actions that will decide their future.”

Stuart Shanker, President of the Council for Early Child Development referring to the *Early Years Study*, by Margaret McCain and Fraser Mustard (1999)

OUR VISION OF CHILD CARE IN THE PROVINCE OF NEW BRUNSWICK

[1] The Office of the Ombudsman and Child and Youth Advocate (hereafter, Our Office) applauds the initiatives of the Department of Family and Community Services (FCS) concerning Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) services in the Province of New Brunswick. We believe the ELCC Consultation will be invaluable in developing a long-term plan for New Brunswick children by drawing on extensive resources and knowledge across the province pertaining to ELCC. As the newly named Child and Youth Advocate, we would like to thank the department for the opportunity to participate in this process. It is imperative to reform ELCC services because of a notable deficiency in New Brunswick, whereby, of the 99,000 children in the province under 12 years of age only 14,170 have access to regulated child care spaces. Unfortunately, the reality is that 86% of children in the province are without access to regulated child care services. In light of these and other challenges in the provision of ELCC services in the province, we are encouraged by the consultation work recently undertaken to further the rights and interests of all children in the province.

[2] Our Office has established five essential principles that we believe must be key in the ELCC long-term plan. In effect, these five principles have influenced all the comments submitted in this brief and served as the criteria against which we assessed the department's initiatives both individually and as a whole. Our Office strongly believes that early learning and child care services in New Brunswick should feature the following five principles: high quality

services, universal accessibility, not-for-profit and publicly funded, trained and adequately remunerated staff, and under provincial regulation. We envision a long-term plan for the province of New Brunswick that is accessible for all families and children, and especially for children in need of early learning and child care services.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE INITIATIVES

[3] Our Office strongly supports the department's initiative to increase and improve information and promotional resources that detail ELCC services in the province. We believe that providing parents with the necessary tools to make informed decisions concerning learning and care services for their children strengthens and furthers the department's overall commitment to quality for our children. Our Office was pleased that FCS not only articulated an overall objective of achieving higher quality services for all children, but also reiterated this imperative within other sections of their initiative. As one example, we noted that the department applied the general objective of higher quality services when it detailed its initiative to increase the number of child care workers with Early Childhood Education (ECE) certificates. Our Office would like to lend its support to the public education aspect of the department's initiatives, its efforts to gain awareness surrounding the reforms they are initiating, as well as their commitment to high quality programming and curriculum. Taken as a whole, the initiatives from FCS create the foundation for a higher quality early learning and child care services plan for the province of New Brunswick.

[4] Another principle our Office considers essential in the provision of ELCC services is accessibility for all New Brunswick children. In keeping with this imperative, we trust that the Quality Child Care Campaign will ensure that ELCC services better address the diverse and stratified needs of New Brunswick children and families. Included in the Quality Child Care Campaign initiative, which we believe will be a significant enhancement to ELCC services in the province, is a commitment to funding increased numbers of quality child care spaces. Also, it is essential to apply the necessary resources to enhance the diversity of child care services in New Brunswick. It is our belief the funding will lead to the creation of new spaces throughout the province for children requiring access to non-traditional child care services by providing an incentive for the development of facilities for families in rural areas, families with infants, and families where parents work nontraditional hours such as evenings and weekends, shift work, or seasonally.

[5] Another positive feature of the child care initiatives is the Early Learning and Child Care Trust Fund, which speaks to our vision of a publicly funded system for the province. It appears that the fund will assist with the creation of more diverse facilities in rural areas etc. as cited in [4] above. Our Office strongly supports the implementation of the Early Learning and Child Care Trust Fund, as we believe it will reinvent child care in New Brunswick, especially in terms of increasing accessibility and diversifying the types of services offered.

In addition, establishing an Early Learning and Child Care Project Review Board to manage new funding initiatives will act as a safeguard against abuse, and further ensure that services satisfy the overall goal of achieving the highest quality of services for all children in the province.

CHALLENGES WITH THE EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE INITIATIVES

[6] Based on our desire to ensure high quality ELCC services throughout the province of New Brunswick, we see four significant limitations with the Early Learning and Child Care Consultation and associated initiatives. Our comments in this area are set out in the following paragraphs. They include recommendations intended to enhance the fundamental principles of quality, accessibility, and public funding for the children of New Brunswick.

[7] First, we note that the *Early Learning and Child Care Trust Fund Background* puts forward a significant initiative for the department to offer assistance for child care providers wishing to obtain an Early Childhood Education (ECE) certificate. Although this is a first step to ensuring improved quality in the provision of child care services, mere encouragement of this type of training may not go far enough in light of the goal of achieving the highest quality services for all children residing in New Brunswick. We believe FCS should consider mandatory training for all child care providers in licensed facilities, and not just for supervisors. This would better achieve the goal of providing high quality services to all New Brunswick children. Should the department agree, and choose to enforce such mandatory training, then it should develop and implement realistic timelines to ensure that child care providers meet projected training goals.

[8] Our second recommendation arises from the value we place on accessibility and our desire to have ELCC services available for all children in the province. We commend the department for addressing most deficiencies with current services, specifically the lack of diverse programs and services for families and children with non-traditional needs. Our Office believes, however, that the department should include funding for the creation of new child care spaces for minority language children. This funding could encourage the creation of spaces for minority language children who require services in one of the official languages in a community where services in that language are not as readily available. In light of our concerns surrounding accessibility to child care spaces for all children, it is crucial to address the diverse needs of minority language children and families as they are also significantly disadvantaged in their ability to find child care providers in the province of New Brunswick. It is our belief that FCS could, and should, improve accessibility for minority language children and include them under the Trust Fund designed to encourage the creation of new child care spaces.

[9] Our third recommendation arises out of our vision for an ELCC plan that is publicly funded and operates on a not-for-profit basis. The Department of Family and Community Services has made significant progress towards this goal by its initial commitment to the \$8-million Early Learning and Child Care Trust Fund. However, we believe long-term financial commitment is vital to ensure continued ELCC services for the children of New Brunswick. Government funding is essential if FCS is to succeed in maintaining quality standards and services for all children throughout the province. The provincial government could further improve the quality of ELCC services by making a long term commitment to fund new initiatives and uphold the quality objective for the department's current initiatives. We will continue to have new generations of children who will need quality child care. Maintaining quality in the system requires long-term public funding for the ELCC system. This is an investment in the future of the province.

[10] Fourthly, we recommend that the needs of Aboriginal and First Nations families be addressed in a special way. This echoes our above-mentioned principle concerning accessibility for all children in the province. We propose to FCS the inclusion of incentive funding in cooperation with the federal government to reach Aboriginal and First Nations children and parents. The department should assist the creation of new spaces that reflect the unique cultural values, child-rearing practices, and language needs of Aboriginal and First Nations communities. It is imperative that the department work in collaboration with Aboriginal and First Nations communities and the federal government, to develop aboriginal-specific resources and strategies to increase the quality, affordability, and availability of child care for Aboriginal and First Nations children.

CONCLUSION

The Office of the Ombudsman and Child and Youth Advocate would like again to thank the Department of Family and Community Services for the opportunity to be part of this consultation process. We see the department's commitment to quality, the initial trust fund of \$8-million, and the proposed incentives to increase the quantity and diversity of child care spaces as strengths of the initiatives. We believe that adopting our recommendations would significantly improve the department's long-term ELCC plan, as well as more adequately address the needs of children in the province of New Brunswick.

In summary, we recommend that the department:

- 1. Consider mandatory training for all child care staff in licensed facilities;**
- 2. Include financial incentives for the creation of minority language child care spaces;**
- 3. Address the needs of Aboriginal and First Nations families in a special way;**
- 4. Commit to long term funding to ensure the sustainability of services for all our children.**

REFERENCES

- New Brunswick Child Care Coalition
- Journée de Réflexion en Éducation, Université de Moncton, le 1^{er} mai 2007
- Council for Early Child Development