

Toward a Provincial Framework for Early Learning and Care in Alberta

Project Overview and Summary of Supporting Discussion Papers



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1.0 Introduction

In fall 2011, the Muttart Foundation, Success By 6 and Calgary UpStart agreed to work together on a draft design for a provincial framework for early learning and care (ELC) in Alberta. The decision to work on the framework followed a series of forums with early childhood education and child care stakeholders which explored the main ideas presented in the Muttart Foundation's discussion paper *In the Best Interests of Children and Families: A Discussion of Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta* (2010).

A common theme within the forums was that of the need to rethink how Alberta approaches early learning and care for its youngest citizens and their families. While stakeholders highlighted examples of individual programs and services that serve children and their families well, they commonly returned to the challenges service providers face in delivering ELC as well as the difficulties families face in accessing affordable, high quality services in their home communities.

The majority saw the development of a new provincial framework for early learning and care, one that provides direction for a more integrated and comprehensive approach to the design, funding and delivery of service, as a key first step to advance the field. They anticipated that such a framework might lay out new guidelines for the governance, planning, management, funding, and delivery of services. And that, over time, it would support the move from a landscape of individual programs and services to a more integrated, publicly managed system with improved outcomes for children 0 to 6 years of age and their families. They further observed that the framework must build on the linkages between early learning and care and other child and

family supports, all of which together contribute to early childhood development.

Drawing on these insights, the Muttart Foundation, Success By 6 and Calgary UpStart approached the Government of Alberta Ministries of Human Services and Education to explore how the design of such a draft framework might align with the province's work on a larger social policy framework. Seeing considerable overlap, the Foundation and its partners committed to work on a draft design for a provincial framework, with the two ministries supporting the costs of stakeholder discussions (scheduled for fall 2012) to inform its structure and content.

This overview provides an introduction to the background papers developed to support these discussions. It includes a working definition of ELC, a brief synopsis of ELC in the province, and outlines the content and format of the papers themselves. It also sketches the starting premises, or assumptions, that inform much of the discussion in the background papers.

While the papers, and the ideas they contain, will form the basis for the fall 2012 stakeholder discussions, the Foundation and its partners hope that they might also generate further and broader discussions on how Alberta might best approach ELC. Developed and written with the expert advice of a small research team, the papers draw on many of the ideas raised during the initial round of stakeholder discussions. They are not the final word on ELC in Alberta, nor any aspect of it; rather they are a starting point for discussing a framework design that will, in turn, be informed by future and wider conversations.

2.0 A Working Definition of Early Learning and Care

Early learning and care has many names and definitions—“early learning and child care”, “early childhood education and care”, and sometimes “quality child care”. The term “early years” is used to refer variously to children aged 0-3 years, 0-5 years and sometimes 0-8 years. Further definitional variation arises when we consider the different service domains that support young children and their families. The term “early childhood development” or “ECD”, for example, is commonly used to include a wider range of services and programs than child care and early childhood education, extending to parental/family leave, health care, social services, literacy, newcomer services, parent support programs and others.

The Muttart Foundation’s 2010 discussion paper *In the Best Interests of Children and Families* used the term early childhood education and care (ECEC) to describe the programs and services for children below the mandatory school age of six years that include both physical care and education. This definition includes centre-based child care, family day homes, preschools, Head Start programs, and Early Childhood Services (prekindergarten and kindergarten) programs. It aligns, in the main, with that used by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The current work uses a variation of the above term - early learning and care to refer to the same supports

and services. This variation is not intended to reshape the area of focus, but rather to align with the current terms in use. The Ministry of Education Business Plan for 2012-15, for example, refers to ‘early learning and child care’ in its goal around the development of a new provincial framework (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Further, the focus on children 0-6 years does not negate the need to take into account how ELC services link with other key services and supports such as out-of-school hours care for school-age children, parental leaves, community public health services and the broad range of family resource programs children attend with their parents, family members or caregivers. The discussion of how best to approach early learning and care must also take into account the complementary nature of these and other services.

3.0 An Alberta Overview: Demographics, Economics, and the Political Culture

Alberta has undergone significant economic and population growth over the last decade. The strong economy has attracted a growing number of young adults and families contributing to a provincial birth rate that remains well above the national average. As a result, Alberta has recorded the highest average population growth rate among the provinces, with much of the growth concentrated in the major urban areas.

Eight out of ten Albertans now live in urban centres (Statistics Canada, 2008) with the Calgary and Edmonton regions dominating the urban landscape. Together, they account for close to 70 per cent of the provincial population and both are among the fastest growing metropolitan regions in the country. Alberta's metropolitan regions are younger than their national counterparts (Government of Alberta, 2011) and form the main destinations for Canadian and international immigrants who move to the province.

Albertans' standard of living has similarly increased since 2000, surpassing smaller increases in the rest of Canada (Government of Alberta, 2011). Alberta families report the highest median after-tax income at \$77,800 in the country (Government of Alberta, 2011) exceeding those of families in Saskatchewan (\$69,900) and in British Columbia (\$67,200). Similarly, the unemployment rate remains low at around 4.2% - one of the three lowest in Canada (Government of Alberta, 2011). One stubborn challenge, however, is that of child poverty with 12.7% of children living in families with incomes below the before-tax Low Income Cut-offs (Campaign 2000, 2011). There are also some indications

that income inequality is increasing prompting some calls for an increase in the minimum wage as well as changes to the provincial flat-rate of income tax (Gurnett, 2009).

Alberta families are not only increasing in number, but they are also changing in profile and structure. National and international migration has contributed to a growing diversity of heritages and culture, while changing social trends have resulted in differing family types and structures. Although Alberta retains a higher proportion of married parent families with young children than other regions of the country (Muttart Foundation, 2010), there are also growing numbers of single parent and common-law families. One in seven children now lives in a single parent family: double the proportion of two generations ago.

The most significant social change is the falling number of families with a stay-at-home parent. The labour force participation rate of mothers with preschool-age children (3-5 years) increased from 35 per cent in 1960 to 70 per cent in 2010; although it remains lower than the national average (Statistics Canada, 2011). This change, which mirrors that in other regions of Canada and beyond, has resulted in families renegotiating the balance between work (outside and inside the home) and raising children. It is one factor contributing to the growing public interest in ELC.

Nationally, Alberta is viewed as both socially and politically conservative; although social commentators and researchers alike increasingly recognize that these terms are best used with caution. The province's growing diversity, its increasingly urban character, and its move to a more diverse economy, albeit one with a strong resource focus, has reshaped much of the social and political landscape. The spring 2012 provincial election, for example, returned a broadly supported Progressive Conservative government with an agenda that includes both social and economic change. The government's commitment to the collaborative development of a social policy framework and the Premier's mandate to her ministers - which includes a focus on early childhood development - reflect a broader political outlook than that of the recent past.

4.0 The Alberta Early Learning and Care Landscape

Under Canadian constitutional arrangements, provincial/territorial governments are responsible for health, education and social programs including ELC. The federal government's cancellation of the emergent national early learning and child care strategy in 2006 leaves Canada without a national approach to ELC and the federal government limited in the main to fiscal transfers to the provinces and territories to support service delivery. Since the cancellation of the national strategy, individual provinces and territories have moved, on their own, to advance the provision of ELC.

Two Alberta Ministries share responsibility for ELC: Human Services for regulated child care and Alberta Education for Early Childhood Services (ECS) including kindergarten. Early Childhood Services (ECS), for children from 2.5 to 6 years, are offered in public, private and/or charter schools as well as by approved, nonprofit ECS operators some of which also provide child care programs. All children are entitled to one year of publicly funded, part-time kindergarten in the year before grade 1, and while kindergarten is not mandatory, the majority of children attend (Beach et al, 2009).

ECS services for children younger than kindergarten age are targeted to those with a mild, moderate or severe disability, or children who are learning English as a second language or the French language. ECS programs in public schools are monitored at the school level, while private ECS programs are monitored by a liaison from the Ministry of Education. Kindergarten teachers must have a teaching certificate, which requires undergraduate or supplementary preparation in

education, but not specific training in early childhood education.

While most Alberta kindergarten programs are half-day, some school boards now provide full-day program options for children considered at-risk of some delay in their early learning. Both the public and separate school boards in Edmonton, for example, offer full-day kindergarten in neighbourhood schools with high ESL populations and/or low-income families. The cost of providing these services is covered in part through community funding support.

Alberta's regulated child care includes full-day centre-based programs, preschools, approved family day homes and group family child care for children 0 – 5 years of age, as well as out-of-school programs for 6 – 12 year olds. Centre-based child care and preschools must meet provincial regulations and be issued a license to operate from the Ministry of Human Services. Family day homes use an agency model, with providers monitored and approved by agencies according to provincial guidelines.

The Ministry of Human Services also supports an accreditation program (the only one in Canada), delivered by a community agency, which recognizes services that meet standards over and above licensing requirements. The Ministry provides additional operational funding to accredited service providers. Over 96 percent of child care centres and family day agencies are either accredited or working towards accreditation. In 2011, there were regulated or approved early learning spaces for approximately three out of ten children below mandatory school age. Ten regional Child and Family Service Authorities (CFSAs) are responsible for the delivery of the child care subsidy program and the licensing and monitoring of services.

The majority of centre-based child cares are incorporated either as nonprofit organizations or private businesses. Most are small organizations, with annual budgets of less than \$500,000; although some larger organizations (both nonprofit and private business) operate a number of different services or program sites. Family day home agencies that oversee individual day home operators are about half nonprofit and half for-profit. Historically, Alberta municipalities played a significant role in the funding, administration and delivery of ELC (Muttart Foundation, 2011). Changes

in federal and provincial funding, as well as the responsibility for regulation of services, resulted in the majority of municipalities discontinuing their former roles in the field. Currently, four municipalities support or deliver ELC for children 0 to 6 years of age; although others report some interest in re-entering the field. Public funding for ELC is available to eligible nonprofit and for-profit service providers.

Provincial regulations require program supervisors, as well as one in three staff in regulated centre-based child care, to hold a two-year Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) diploma or equivalent. All other staff must complete a three-credit ELCC course or equivalent. The requirements differ somewhat for family day homes and group family care. Grants provided under accreditation funding (including wage enhancements) have significantly boosted staff earnings.

Parent fees cover much of the costs of service. Provincial subsidies are available to parents on low to middle incomes who are either in employment or schooling. The province recently raised the family income thresholds significantly increasing the families eligible for subsidy. There are no provincial guidelines for child care fees. Service providers establish program fees which may vary based on the age of the child. The average monthly fees differ across the province, but generally exceed the maximum subsidy support available. Alberta's expenditures on regulated child care have risen considerably over the last decade. The provincial government's child care budget for 2012 is approximately \$265m.

5.0 Background Discussion Papers in Support of Draft Provincial Framework Design

Two background discussion papers support the provincial framework discussions. The first introduces the meaning and practice of integration. It outlines the main arguments advanced for integrating ELC services and describes how individual jurisdictions have approached integration. The second, and longer, paper considers what are referred to as ‘integrative elements’ and outlines how these might, as components of a larger provincial framework, support the greater integration of services. Six integrative elements are discussed:

- the goals and purposes for early learning and care
- the governance and management of services
- financing
- the organization of services
- the early learning and care workforce, and
- a curriculum framework for early learning and care

The discussion of each follows a generally similar format.

Five starting assumptions inform the arguments and ideas presented in the discussion papers:

- First, that ELC is a public good and a shared private and public responsibility. Done well, it yields both private benefits for individual children and their families and public benefits for the larger community. The balance jurisdictions strike between public and private responsibilities largely shapes the access families have to high quality, affordable services at the local level.
- Second, that over time, ELC services should become accessible to all families who want to access them. Accessible means that services are reasonably available in the local community; that the cost of service is not a barrier to access; and that services reflect families’ preferences, needs and diversity, as well as fully including children with special needs;
- Third, that high quality is fundamental in ELC. Poor or modest quality services are poor uses of public and private resources, and do little to support child development or provide positive early learning experiences. Indeed, poor quality services may harm or impede the healthy development of vulnerable or marginalized children.
- Fourth, that integrating child care and early education services can contribute significantly to quality and access in service environments while making more effective use of current resources. Integrated services are more convenient for families and provide greater continuity of learning and care for children.
- And fifth, that public management models for ELC can support greater service integration, can foster equity and wider access, and can contribute to higher quality services through the reconciliation of public and private interests.

These starting assumptions, which take into account the best available evidence from research and comparative analysis, the current knowledge of parents’ expectations regarding ELC in Alberta, as well as the findings of the previous work undertaken by the Muttart Foundation, Success By 6 and Calgary UpStart in 2010 and 2011, will be revisited and re-examined throughout the larger discussion of an Alberta early learning and care framework.

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