

Moving Forward on a Renewed Ontario Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework for Ontario

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Introduction

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) welcomes the provincial consultation on the development of a renewed policy framework to guide the development of child care and early years policy in Ontario and future decision-making, including the expansion of 100,000 new child care spaces over the next five years. The consultation document “Building a Better Future: A Discussion for Transforming Early Years and Child Care in Ontario” provides a good platform for ongoing dialogue and the setting out of core strategic pillars.

Ontario’s children and families will benefit from a renewed Ontario Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework to support an integrated system of child care and early years programs focused on quality, affordability, access and parent choice, and flexibility; targeted towards the child care needs of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers as part of a broader continuum for children and families.

The Municipal Role and Interest in a Renewed Framework

AMO’s interest in a renewed framework emanates from the significant role that Ontario’s 47 municipal service system managers (i.e. upper and single tier municipal governments and District Social Service Administration Boards) play by co-funding, planning, managing and, in some cases, directly delivering child care and early years services to residents of their municipalities across the entire province. As of January 2018, these municipal service managers will assume new responsibility and an enhanced role for the planning and management of the Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centers. Given the significant role, especially that of a co-funder, the municipal sector needs a well-considered voice in this consultation.

AMO has generally supported the government’s modernization initiatives over the past few years including new legislation, regulations, and a funding formula. The provincial effort is commendable to transform the system to meet the needs of children and their families in conjunction with municipal service system managers on the ground. Investments in the child care sector have also made a difference in the lives of Ontarians.

Our association is supportive of the new focus shifting from modernization and stabilization toward expansion and affordability. The availability of licensed child care and early years programming is essential to addressing the social determinants of health and to support individual’s participation in the labour force.

Feedback on the Strategic Pillars of the Renewed Framework

Access

There are many ways to increase access. Continued flexibility for municipal service managers to make decisions based on local need and circumstances will make this happen.

In addition to the focus on new spaces, attention to the sustainability and viability of existing spaces is needed. The child care funding formula allocation methodology should be reviewed, and new investments as needed, to ensure that it addresses sustainability issues for child care operators, especially in rural and northern areas of the province. As well, any unintended consequences that result from provincial education policies is worth considering so there is not loss of existing spaces. The government should review any planned school closures where existing child care spaces may

be in jeopardy and direct school boards to consider this as a factor in the Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) process.

In addition to child care, access to family support programs is also of critical importance. Increased program funding for the Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centres, with indexation to the rate of inflation on an annual basis, will expand access to services for children and their families. Provincial program funding has not increased in many years and, as a result, the money available for services has likely decreased year over year due to inflationary increases.

Affordability

Though an expansion of supply will result in greater access to licensed child care spaces, if it is not affordable then it will not increase access to children of middle and low-income families. Continued provincial investment for operating grants can make the spaces more affordable for middle-income families and more fee subsidies will achieve this for low-income ones.

The planned expansion of 100,000 new child care spaces is welcome news and will make a difference in the lives of Ontario's children and their families, though a strong provincial commitment to affordability is needed. From a municipal perspective, the expansion needs to be accompanied by both 100% provincial capital and operating dollars, including administrative resources for municipal service managers. Not all municipal governments and district social services administration boards (DSSABs) are in a fiscal position to contribute a cost share for the new spaces, and as a result, inequities may occur across the province if the new spaces accrue to only certain areas of the province.

Responsiveness

The Province can play a facilitative role developing tools to assist municipal service system managers and operators to deliver services that are more responsive. For example, an important contribution by the Province could be to provide tools and resource to guide operators to provide culturally appropriate service delivery models to Indigenous Peoples.

Quality

Continued wage enhancements for Early Childhood Educators in the sector will help address challenges of recruitment and retention for operators, which is particularly acute in some areas of the province especially in northern and rural areas. These professionals are essential to raise quality in the system in a consistent manner across the province.

The Ministry should continue to develop tools such as common assessment to be used by municipal service system managers to assess quality of programming.

Conclusion

Attention to child care and early learning makes good economic sense for Ontario. These systems support local economies and help families and communities thrive by making full-time work

possible for families. Especially in northern and rural communities, child care systems and early years programming help attract and retain the skilled workforce needed to grow local economies. Strategic policymaking and continuing investments in the child care and early years sector will serve to increase and enhance access, affordability, quality, and responsiveness. However, the provincial and municipal governments cannot do it without renewed federal engagement. In the 2016 Budget, the federal government has proposed to invest \$500 million in the 2016 Budget to support the establishment of a new National Early Learning and Child Care Framework. This renewed federal engagement in early learning and child care should support a system that is currently not funded sufficiently to meet the demand for both supply and affordability. AMO looks forward to working with the provincial government to promote municipal priorities and anticipates new federal investments for child care and early learning to flow in 2017-2018. It is critical that we move forward together in a new environment of intergovernmental collaboration that has the potential to expand access to more affordable, high quality, responsive child care and early years programming for Ontario residents.