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# ***With our best future in mind: Implementing early learning in Ontario*** **A summary and comment from OMSSA**

**July 28, 2009**

On June 15, 2009, Dr. Charles Pascal issued his long-anticipated report on early learning in Ontario, titled, *With our best future in mind: Implementing early learning in Ontario*. The report recommends the creation of a new integrated child and family service system for Ontario by blending municipal service system management and planning with school board responsibility for new early learning programs and extended-day activities.

If implemented as proposed, a broad Early Years system will help a new generation of children to prepare for success in school and beyond. Such a program will move Ontario towards its legislated goals for poverty reduction and can help to ensure economic prosperity for the province. The proposed management and structure of the program also reinforces a positive municipal-provincial relationship that emerged from the 2008 Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review.

While recognizing that Dr. Pascal's report remains at the recommendation stage, OMSSA is pleased to offer this summary and comment, particularly because the report clearly affirms the municipal service system management role in early learning and child care services in Ontario. Dr. Pascal rightly places CMSMs and DSSABs at the centre of the planning, implementation, and management of a new child and family service system (hereafter referred to as the Birth-to-12 Child and Family System). In so doing, he demonstrates a keen understanding of municipal service system managers' unique position to manage and deliver quality human services within a framework of accountability.

Our primary response, therefore, is that there be ***full endorsement of the Early Learning Advisor's report as government policy, announced with clear and achievable timelines towards implementation***. The implementation must begin with the establishment of a new Early Years division within the Ministry of Education and then proceed with a clear and achievable timetable. Partial implementation is simply not an option. Children and families will see the greatest benefit only when the provincial and municipal governments work together to put the entire plan into action.

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## Our vision

Over the past year, OMSSA produced two documents that contained our vision for full-day early learning: *Full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-old children: Building a stronger early learning and child care system in Ontario* (October 2008) and *Hand in hand: How the province and municipalities can create the best early learning and child care service system for Ontario* (March 2009). Both papers contained a series of recommendations related to full-day early learning and the broad restructuring of services for children and their families.

OMSSA built the recommendations on an understanding that a full-day early learning and child care system would strengthen the existing system of services for young children. It would not be a separate system for 4- and 5-year-old children, but a system integrated with the continuum of services for children available locally. We further stressed that a sustainable full-day early learning and child care system must not destabilize other early childhood services, but should enhance the funding and sustainability of the broader system of child care and special needs services.

We are pleased to note that Dr. Pascal's report reflects much of what OMSSA advocated in our position papers, in terms of service system management, program consolidation, and other issues.

## Service system management

At its core, Dr. Pascal's report reinforces the municipal service system management role, as previously acknowledged in the Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review. It is within this affirmation that the report places the responsibility for a new Birth-to-12 Child and Family System squarely with municipal service system managers.

OMSSA has long argued that any revamping of the early learning environment must retain a central role for municipal service system managers. In our *Hand in hand* paper, we wrote:

*It is crucial for the continuity of service delivery that the full-day early learning program be fully integrated with the municipally managed children's services system. Setting up a system for full-day early learning that is integrated with the current child care and children's services system is productive and efficient, putting the needs of families and children at the core.*

Dr. Pascal's report comes out firmly in support of municipal service system managers, who are to lead the system while working in partnership with boards of education and community Best Start partners. In several places the

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report speaks directly to the municipal service management role for the entire early years system. For example:

*“Municipal authorities...are best positioned to lead the transformation of service delivery for our youngest learners. They already manage children’s services, make a substantial contribution to operations, undertake community planning, and promote program quality.”*

*“Municipal authorities are uniquely positioned to translate provincial goals to ensure that local priorities and circumstances are considered.”*

*“Building on their current role, municipalities are well positioned to transform child care and other early childhood programs into a child and family service...”*

With CMSMs and DSSABs responsible for leading the development of community Early Years Service Plans, municipal service managers will be well positioned in their relationship with school boards. These Service Plans will establish the levels of funding required to support and sustain a comprehensive system of services for children, including what is needed for Best Start Child and Family Centres, the Early Learning Program, and school-age programming.

## **Program and service consolidation**

In our *Hand in hand* paper, OMSSA called for a better consolidation of the variety of community supports and programs for children:

*Having these and other programs be part of a single, municipally managed system would reduce service duplication and improve service delivery, and would facilitate integrated community planning. Moreover, it would build on local strengths of CMSMs and DSSABs to respond to the specific and diverse needs of the children and families in their communities.*

Dr. Pascal’s report clearly supports OMSSA’s vision by recommending the creation of Best Start Child and Family Centres, which would emerge from an extensive “reengineering” of the “resources, governance, and mandates of existing child care, family resource, and early intervention services.” The report even suggests bringing federally funded programs such as the Canadian Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP) and the Community Action Program for Children (CAP-C) into closer relationship with the Best Start Child and Family Centres.

We should note that Dr. Pascal recommends that the Centres need not necessarily be directly operated by municipalities, but could also be operated

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by school boards, post-secondary institutions, or non-profit agencies. This will offer service managers the opportunity to work collaboratively across their community with the many stakeholders who want to see the success of the Best Start Child and Family Centres.

## **Funding sustainability**

One of the key recommendations from Dr. Pascal is that a new Birth-to-12 Child and Family System be appropriately funded. He writes that:

*Funding sustainability must include:*

- *a consistent, stable, and indexed, multi-year funding envelope based on an equitable formula that reflects the local costs of child and family services;*
- *appropriate capital funding to meet local needs.*

This recommendation echoes OMSSA's long-standing position that sustainable funding for early learning must be provided to allow for service managers to plan and manage the system properly. In *Hand in hand*, we recommended that funding sustainability include:

1. *a consistent, stable, and indexed, multi-year funding envelope based on a consistent and equitable formula that reflects true local costs of children's services*
2. *capital funding to expand the children's service sector to meet local needs and to respond to the demands introduced by full-day early learning*

Dr. Pascal provides an overview of what he estimates the costs to be of a new Early Learning program, which include sufficient funds provided to school boards for new programs for children 4- to 12-years old (estimates at full implementation are \$790 – \$990 million/year. Annualized capital costs are estimated at \$130 million).

As well, Dr. Pascal recommends an infusion of some new money to support the broader Birth-to-12 Child and Family System. First, he notes the need for “resources associated with regulation and oversight,” which suggests that he has administrative funding in mind. Second, he writes that “some additional transition funding may be required” to establish a comprehensive system. This money would later be rolled into the “children-related budgets of municipal authorities to support expanded access to Best Start Child and Family Centres.” In other words, monies to set up the Centres would then carry over to help in their on-going operations.

Although the Birth-to-12 Child and Family System will require new investments, Dr. Pascal does envision a degree of affordability. For example,

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the Best Start Child and Family Centres will be funded, in large part, through the consolidation of existing provincial programs and resources into a single funding envelope transferred to the municipal service system manager. Having funding flowed through a single consolidated envelope will allow CMSMs and DSSABs the flexibility to address transitional needs and long-term restructuring needs in the child and family service system. (We must note here, that the funding consolidation notwithstanding, there will remain funding challenges for the Best Start program and other early learning and child care services.)

Dr. Pascal's emphasis on efficiencies is important in light of the present economic situation. OMSSA supports the many specific recommendations that do not entail new costs but in fact redirect existing program budgets, such as the reallocation of OEYC budgets to reduce the number of administrative entities and the associated administrative costs. Such funding shifts could allow for improved programming within existing allocations, leading to better coordination of children's services within CMSM/DSSAB boundaries under the mandate of the municipal service system manager.

Finally, we understand that municipal cost-sharing would continue for those programs where it exists today.

## **Special needs**

In our paper on full-day learning, OMSSA called for expanded support and interventions for children with special needs. Specifically, we recommended that a full-day early learning system should fund and coordinate programs for children with special needs through the Special Needs Integration/Resourcing system within the CMSMs and DSSABs. We also called for additional training for early learning staff to identify and work with children with special needs.

The report addresses our first recommendation in proposing that the Best Start Child and Family Centres play a role in the "consolidation and re-engineering" of special needs programming. The Centres will offer links to specialized treatment agencies as well as offer "less clinical, more family friendly" space for other community programs to deliver services.

As for staff qualifications, Dr. Pascal describes Centre staff as being qualified to "notice developmental delays, initiate appropriate responses, and know when more specialized interventions are required." What is not included in the report, however, is a discussion of how to move staff along the path toward obtaining these levels of qualification.

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## Next steps and questions

*With Our Best Future in Mind* offers a bold vision for early learning and child care in Ontario. Issues of immediate priority to OMSSA include:

### **I. Implementation: *The need for full provincial endorsement with clear and achievable implementation timelines.***

At this point the report must be seen as a series of recommendations to the Premier and not as government policy. It is a long journey from recommendation to implementation, and OMSSA recognizes that much collaborative work among municipalities, province, and local communities remains to make this journey a success.

Our primary recommendation at this point is that the provincial government fully endorse the recommendations in the Early Learning Advisor's report as official policy, announced with clear and achievable timelines towards implementation.

Partial implementation is simply not an option.

Children and families will see the greatest benefit only when the provincial and municipal governments work together to put the entire plan into action.

To begin this process, we recommend the following first steps:

- **Establish a new Early Years Division in the Ministry of Education.** Creating this new ministerial division, headed by an Assistant Deputy Minister who can champion the cause for the Early Learning Program and the broader Birth-to-12 Child and Family System, will ensure that there are structural supports to implement new policies and programs.
- **Begin implementation discussions with municipalities as full partners.** As with the Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review, municipal service managers must be active partners in the transition from recommendation to implementation. We have been pleased with the alignment of our vision with the recommendations in Dr. Pascal's report, and look forward to continuing this partnership.
- **Develop a joint accountability framework between the province and municipalities.** As the first product of the municipal-provincial conversations, an accountability framework will enable the policy and program implementation details to flow smoothly. Furthermore, once the municipal-provincial accountability relationship is established,

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there can then be separate accountability structures between the municipal service managers and the local service system (including school boards, Best Start Networks, special needs agencies, child care centres, and other community groups that might be involved in the Birth-to-12 Child and Family System).

**2. Roles and responsibilities: *The need to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the municipal, provincial, educational, and community partners.***

Although the report sets out a broad vision for the different roles and responsibilities of local service system managers and school boards, much more clarification and definition is necessary. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities are essential for a number of reasons:

- **New partners.** The recommendation to create a new Early Years Division within the Ministry of Education will add a new provincial partner to the early learning landscape which has been led by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. Clarity of roles and responsibilities will aid in the establishment of new relationships among these partners.
- **Provincial messaging.** The addition of a new provincial partner also adds importance of having a consistent, single message that is communicated to municipalities regarding the Birth-to-12 Child and Family System. Such provincial messaging jointly issued by both ministries will help to ensure that local communications between service managers and school boards are based on consistent information.
- **Geography.** We recognize that school board boundaries often differ from the community catchment boundaries of municipal service managers. With CMSMs and DSSABs overseeing the planning for the Birth-to-12 Child and Family System, municipal service system managers will work with school boards to navigate these boundary challenges. The experiences of the Best Start Networks offer a precedent for finding solutions to the question of geography, within the defined roles and responsibilities of each partner.

In the end, clearly defined roles and responsibilities will help to ensure that program development does not happen in isolation. The Birth-to-12 Child and Family System touches on a number of other larger

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systems—both the community service system and the education system—and it is imperative that all partners see and understand how what they do relates to these other systems.

**3. *Local flexibility: The ability to develop locally appropriate service plans within a joint municipal-provincial accountability framework.***

OMSSA has long advocated for a high degree of flexibility in developing models that are appropriate for local communities. We will continue to emphasize this point as we move to discussions about implementation. Here, we will look to ensure local flexibility in service planning and delivery in such things as:

- criteria that communities can use to situate Best Start Child and Family Centres beyond schools, where appropriate
- the role of other child care environments within this new Early Learning Program, including home-based child care

The Best Start Networks provide excellent examples of how local flexibility can work within a provincial policy framework. OMSSA will work with our provincial and community partners to develop an outcomes-based Birth-to-12 Child and Family System that situates locally relevant community plans within a municipal-provincial accountability framework.

Finally, we must note that the success of building locally appropriate service plans within a municipal-provincial accountability framework must be continually measured and evaluated. OMSSA believes that such evaluation can occur through the transferring of the Early Years Data Analysis Coordinators to municipalities to serve as valuable community resources.

**4. *Best Start Child and Family Centres: The need to clarify the structure of these Centres and their relationship to the broader community service sector.***

As noted above, the vision for such centres as bringing together the range of community services and programs is something that OMSSA advocated for. Such consolidation will clearly benefit children and families by having a single Centre to access a range of community services. This consolidation also offers financial benefits by allowing for the blending of funding streams into a single administrative envelope.

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As discussions move forward regarding the creation of Best Start Child and Family Centres, OMSSA will look to contribute clarification on issues such as:

- the relationship of these Centres with other programs delivered as part of the service system for children
- the relationship of between municipal service system managers and Public Health Units

**5. Licensing: *The transformation of licensing into a quality assurance mechanism.***

Dr. Pascal has suggested that licensing become a municipal responsibility. If this recommendation does proceed, it will have financial and administrative implications for service managers, particularly smaller ones with less administrative capacity and resources to oversee licensing responsibilities.

Dr. Pascal's report also suggests that better clarification of roles and responsibilities for licensing can lead to a more robust process for assuring high levels of service quality. In this way, licensing can be transformed from measuring the context of care (meeting minimum physical standards for what centres look like) to measuring the impact of care (how well centres deliver quality care for children). OMSSA looks forward to the opportunity to work with our provincial partners to discuss service quality and evaluation.

**6. Special needs: *The need to clarify the place of special needs services within the Best Start Child and Family Centres and within school-based Early Learning programs.***

The report proposes that Best Start Child and Family Centres "play a central role in the consolidation and re-engineering of early identification and intervention programs." What is less clear is how this role plays out from an administrative and funding perspective. Because the report is silent on these issues, OMSSA and special needs organizations must play a role in clarifying issues such as:

- the relationship between service managers and special needs program staff
- the way that special needs training becomes integral to the training and certification of staff in the Best Start Child and Family Centres,

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in school-based Early Learning Programs, and across the entire Birth-to-12 Child and Family System

- the ways that children with special needs will access services within school-based settings

**7. Funding: *The imperative of multi-year, sustainable funding to support the service delivery and administration of a new Birth-to-12 Child and Family System.***

Finally, the enthusiastic support shown by service managers for a reengineered early learning and child care system does not negate concern for how this system will be funded. Such concern emerges for three reasons.

First, because there will continue to be municipal investment into the system, municipalities will want assurances that the system will be appropriately supported by all partners.

Second, Ontario's current early learning and child care system is not currently funded to sustainable levels—both in terms of service delivery and service administration. Even if the report's estimated costs and savings are accurate, it is difficult to imagine that a revamped system with the same funding levels would garner enough savings to be financially viable on its own.

Finally, as the government proceeds with implementation of Dr. Pascal's recommendations, CMSMs and DSSABs will be in a unique position to simultaneously lead the systemic transformation and continue to be responsible for on-going service management and delivery of early learning and child care. This exciting opportunity must be properly resourced, therefore, to ensure that Ontario's children and families continue to receive the highest levels of service quality possible.

Therefore, OMSSA will look to build consensus among the provincial and municipal partners on:

- identifying "quick wins" within Dr. Pascal's report that can be implemented at low or no cost, separate from the higher-costing systemic reengineering that is proposed.

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- ensuring sustainable levels of administrative funding for the Birth-to-12 Child and Family System, to maintain the levels of service delivery even as the system is being transformed
  - securing provincial and municipal commitment to provide on-going sustainable funding

Complicating the funding issue is the question of the federally derived Best Start funding. Although the provincial government has stepped in with \$18 million in bridge funding for Best Start, there remains a \$45 million gap in the Best Start system. This gap means that service managers will be forced to shrink their early learning system between now and September 2010 and then be expected to expand the system to implement a new Birth-to-12 Child and Family System.

In short, sustainable resourcing must be put in place from the outset to enable CMSMs and DSSABs to lead the implementation and management of a new Birth-to-12 Child and Family System, as recommended in Dr. Pascal's report.

## Conclusion

OMSSA sees Dr. Pascal's report on a new Birth-to-12 Child and Family System as a highly positive development in the transformation of Ontario's Early Years system. We recognize that the implementation of the report will be buffeted by obstacles. We also recognize that the complete realization of a reconfigured early learning and child care system will take many years to achieve.

Despite these challenges, OMSSA is excited about the opportunities that lay before us. A decade ago, municipalities were entrusted with the responsibility of managing Ontario's human service systems. Their resounding success in meeting those responsibilities has led to a new challenge. We are confident that municipal service system managers will yet again be acknowledged as the successful stewards of the early learning and child care for our province's children and families.