



Analysis of Ontario Early Years Policy Framework

On January 23, 2013, the Government of Ontario released its [Ontario Early Years Policy Framework](#) (OEYC). The OEYC framework outlines the vision, guiding principles, and key areas for action to build a cohesive and coordinated early years system for children aged 0 to 6 years and their families. The framework is the next step to the Provincial Discussion Paper on [Modernizing Child Care in Ontario](#) and is driven by four guiding principles:

- child- and family-centred services,
- quality,
- community partnerships, and
- public accountability.

The framework focuses on four key priority areas:

1. continuing with full implementation of full-day kindergarten by September 2014;
2. creating an effective approach for Best Start Child and Family Centres by September 2014
3. improving the delivery of speech and language services; and,
4. stabilizing and transforming the child care sector.

To meet these priorities, the Province will undertake a number of key actions, including:

- Transferring responsibility for implementation of Best Start Child and Family Centres from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) to the Ministry of Education (MEDU)
- Transferring responsibilities related to Province's support of Data Analysis Coordinators (DACs) and the Early Development Instrument (EDI) from MCYS to MEDU
- Implementing the Schools-First Child Care Capital Retrofit Policy
- Implementing a new and more equitable, transparent and streamlined child care funding formula and funding framework in 2013

Overview:

The OEYC framework continues along the road of establishing a quality system of early learning education, child care and supports in Ontario. This progressive approach recognizes how a system that provides learning and supports to children and families is a key factor in the economic health and sustainability of the province. An educated and prepared labour force has been demonstrated to yield important socio-economic benefits over the long term.

OMSSA is pleased to see that that the government in the OEYC framework, remains committed to a strong early learning and child care system.

OMSSA is also pleased to see, that achieving this vision is built on a number of our key advocacy priorities, most notably:

- recognizing and supporting the role of CMSMS and DSSABs as key partners in the commitment to developing, implementing and sustaining the governments early learning and child care priorities; and
- the importance of an integrated and coordinated lens to the planning and implementation of the priorities.

Areas of interest to OMSSA Members:

Best Start Child and Family Centres (BSCFC):

Currently the government invests approximately \$90 million annually for Ontario Early Years Centres, Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, Child Care/Family Resource Centres and Better Beginnings, Better Futures. As a commitment to ensuring children and family receive services and information in a timely, coordinated and simplified manner, the government will be establishing BSCFCs that will integrate and coordinate the various services currently available. It is not clear whether coordinating and streamlining funding is included in this approach.

Developing the BSCFCs will involve:

- establishing a common governance structure for family support programs, child care, and full-day kindergarten by transferring responsibility for implementing Best Start Child and Family Centres to the Ministry of Education;
- establishing a common mandate and identity by using the current levels of investment to integrate family support programs in Ontario Early Years Centres, Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, Child Care/Family Resource Centres, and Better Beginnings, Better Futures;
- creating a core set of expectations that identifies expected outcomes and services that families can expect to access;
- developing and maintaining strong and effective partnerships between early years service providers and ensuring communities have the flexibility they need to adapt services to meet local needs;

This approach seems to make sense. However, important considerations in moving to and implementing this model include overall implications on the service system and funding as well as;

- the importance of OMSSA and its members in establishing a common governance structure, mandate for Best Start Child and Family Centres and family support programs'; and
- Ensuring against cost implications and risk for municipalities and DSSABs in moving to a new framework and service delivery environment

OMSSA assumes that the government's commitment to partnership, building on what is working and recognizing the importance of local realities will be reflected in the policy development approach and outcomes.

Improving the Delivery of Speech and Language Services:

In an effort to improve access to services, the government is proposing to address the current challenges of having five speech and language programs run by three different ministries, including the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education.

The OEYC framework proposes that the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, working with partners across ministries and in communities, will re-engineer speech and language services to:

- improve service access for children and families;
- reduce unnecessary duplication of assessments;
- reduce fragmentation of services;
- create improved service continuity for children and families, for example, as they enter school.

Again, while this approach makes sense, more information is needed regarding what “reengineering” of these services mean and the role and impact to CMSMs, DSSABs and children and families.

Stabilizing and transforming the child care system:

As OMSSA members are aware, the Ministry of Education recently announced and implemented the new child care funding model. A great deal of time and effort went in to this exercise and the Ministry must be recognized for addressing the long standing challenges in the existing funding model. While local realities have varying implications on the long term application of the model the government importantly took the short term step to mitigate against immediate funding losses. Given the current fiscal climate it must be recognized that this was no small feat for provincial officials to achieve.

It cannot however be ignored, that the long term viability of this valued public service is precarious. This concern will be weighed against ongoing and future transformation in the early learning and child care system and the municipal role in funding, managing and delivering these services. This includes recognizing potential administrative or other cost pressures coming out of policy and program changes identified in the OEYC framework.

OMSSA remains supportive of the government’s ongoing efforts and we understand the value of the programs on the lives of children and families in all communities across this province. It will be important that transformation and ongoing change takes place over time, is measured and undertaken in partnership with OMSSA and its members.

Other initiatives:

In addition to the key areas of change identified above, the government also commits, in the OEYC framework, to:

- develop a comprehensive framework to guide programming in licensed child care and family support settings, building on the work of the Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning and the principles of the Early Learning Framework;
- develop and implement an “Aménagement linguistique” framework for the early years within the French-language education system;
- review the Day Nurseries Act, Ontario’s child care legislation,

- better support children with a range of abilities in licensed child care;
- work with Aboriginal, First Nation, Métis, and Inuit partners to develop an appropriate approach and system;
- continue to strengthen the capacity and leadership of the child care sector,
- develop resources to help parents understand the key elements of high-quality child care.

A number of points of interest in the above for OMSSA and its members include:

- the ongoing implications of adhering to French Language Service requirements and the duplication and administrative efforts and costs associated with developing multiple plans and responses across multiple ministries and programs;
- special needs resourcing implications;
- AMO, OMSSA's and the municipal sector's role in the development of the new legislation; and
- Implications of program guidelines within the current restrictive administrative and funding environment. OMSSA hopes the current ambitious deadlines for service managers and system partners to submit local plans, required documentation, and administer funding stemming from the new child care formula can be avoided in future program and policy implementation.

Public Accountability:

Consistent with the government's commitment to improve the funding, delivery and outcomes of public services, the OEYC framework identifies public accountability and value for money as a driver of the system envisioned.

A key element to OMSSA's long standing support for and promotion of integrated human services planning, delivery and funding has been that CMSMs and DSSABs as orders of government, are entrusted with the accountable provision of public funds and the returns on these investments. Finding administrative and planning efficiencies underscored by improved program access and outcomes have long been the focus and priority of municipal councils and DSSABs.

Committing to a partnership with CMSMs and DSSABs, as the OEYC framework does, is welcomed and makes sense. Included in this partnership is that service managers will take a lead role in working with other key partners like school boards and service agencies. Moving in this direction supports good public policy and accountability.

Next Steps

Anticipating the reconvening of the legislature in mid to late February, OMSSA looks to working in partnership with the government and the Ministry of Education on these next important steps in early learning and child car transformation, and as always, ensuring our members needs are met to serve the children and families in their communities.