

2. Childcare

Childcare has experienced a surge of international attention in recent years as policy makers recognized that access to high quality "early childhood education and care" - as it is now commonly called - can strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning for all children.

An excellent comparative and analytical framework is the report, "*Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care*", issued by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD study identifies eight key elements of successful ECEC public policies. These predict whether high quality accessible ECEC services will be available in a jurisdiction. We can use these policy elements as a framework for examining the childcare situation in Ontario.

- **A systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation.**
 - In Ontario, the delivery of early childhood education and care is highly fragmented.

- **A strong and equal partnership with the education system.**
 - There are no systems in place to blend childcare and the public education system. In the latter half of the 1990s, that relationship became increasingly strained.

- **A universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support.**
 - Equitable access to childcare is absolutely non-existent in Ontario. Although studies show that regulated care is the choice of most parents, it remains available only to the "lucky" high-income earner or the very lucky low-income fee subsidy recipient.

- **Substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure.**
 - While the Ontario government claims it is spending more on childcare than any previous government, analysis of provincial allocations for regulated childcare shows a reduction of almost \$100 million from 1995 to 2001 - the first reductions in childcare funding since World War II.

- **A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance.**
 - In 1996, the Government of Ontario released the findings of a year-long investigation into childcare. Ironically, it is titled, "*Improving Ontario's ChildCare System*".

Recommendations included:

- reducing staff/child ratios
 - diluting staff qualifications
 - diverting fee subsidies to unregulated programs
 - permitting home childcare providers to care for two additional school-age children
 - reducing requirements for facilities
 - reducing licensing enforcements
- **Appropriate Training And Working Conditions For Staff In All Forms Of Provision.**
 - Even though most early childhood educators in Ontario have post-secondary education, low wages in childcare mean some staff live close to, or in, poverty. They earn about the same as parking lot attendants.
- **Systematic attention to monitoring and data collection.**
 - There is no current Ontario data available for use by the community.
- **A stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation.**
 - In Ontario throughout the past few years, government research has been conducted, publicized, and then ignored. The ability of non-governmental organizations to conduct their own research is hampered by funding cuts to their operating budgets.

Recommendations for A People's Charter:

The government should use these policy elements as a starting point for rebuilding early childhood education and care in Ontario:

- **A systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation.**
 - *Ontario must adopt a systematic and integrated approach to ECEC policy and service provision to move towards a system of seamless, inclusive services offering both care and education. We must move away from a targeted, subsidy-based system to a publicly-funded system.*

- **A strong and equal partnership with the education system.**
 - *Ontario must devise a service system based on the best available knowledge that makes it the foundation for lifelong learning. This system must integrate the current childcare system under the Ministry of Community and Social Services with kindergarten under the Ministry of Education and include a continuum of family support programs. An Ontario government could, with public consultation, choose among several options to implement this system.*

- **A universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support.**
 - *All children must have equal opportunities to attend quality childcare, regardless of family income, parental employment status, special educational needs or ethnic/language background.*
 - *Ontario must develop a multi-year plan reflecting the goal of universal access. It must move toward expansion of services to ensure every child has access to ECEC services. Programs must be structured to be sensitive to parental work, education and family needs.*

- **Substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure.**
 - *Ontario must set a goal matching the European Union's spending one percent of GDP on ECEC services. The first step is for the government to immediately restore regulated childcare funding to 1995 levels. At the same time, it must take leadership with the federal government and at the national federal-provincial-territorial level, calling for a national policy framework for ECEC. The federal government must live up to its responsibilities and provide substantial funding for ECEC. Funding levels must increase annually within planned expansion until universal access is achieved.*
- **A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance with regulatory standards supported by coordinated investment.**
 - *Ontario must strengthen its legislative, regulatory and consultative role to ensure best practices in ECEC programs become the norm. This must include participation of parents and other experts. A clear plan must be developed and implemented to ensure that Ontario's ECEC system becomes a high quality environment enhancing healthy development for all children. This requires that the physical and human environments for children are appropriately funded and sustainable.*
- **Appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision with strong staff training and fair working conditions across the sector.**
 - *Ontario must immediately restore funding to achieve pay equity for ECEC teachers and undertake a full analysis of workforce issues including recruitment and retention, career laddering, enhanced training possibilities and gender issues.*
- **Systematic attention to monitoring and data collection.**
 - *Ontario must create a plan for monitoring, collecting and providing up-to-date, reliable and accurate information about ECEC throughout the province and adopt a sustainable long-term research agenda.*

- ***A stable framework and long-term agenda for research as part of a continuous improvement process.***
 - *Ontario must remain at the forefront of new research. We must act on new research supporting the key elements of ECEC.*

Each political party's election platform should:

- ***Commit to fund research at both the government and NGO levels, and to share the results of the research with the community.***
- ***Recognize that ECEC is a public priority.***
- ***Acknowledge the public nature of ECEC and include a commitment to invest the necessary resources.***
- ***Support an integrated system providing seamless services that meet the needs of all families regardless of income, job status, or geography.***
- ***Commit to a systematic and planned approach with ongoing expansion towards the goal of universal access to services.***
- ***Commit to high quality ECEC for early childhood education.***
- ***Guarantee salary and benefit levels that accurately reflect the value and skills of those who work in ECEC.***