

Submission to the Early Years and Child Care Strategy

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Campaign 2000

Campaign 2000 is a national, non-partisan network of 120 national, provincial and community partner organizations committed to working together to end child and family poverty in Canada. Ontario Campaign 2000 is a provincial partner with over 70 member organizations across the province.
www.campaign2000.ca

Introduction

Ontario Campaign 2000 is a provincial coalition of over 70 active partner organizations committed to eradicating child and family poverty in Ontario and Canada. Our membership is broad and diverse. It includes faith groups, educators who belong to ETFO, OSSTF and OECTA, the health and community sectors serving children and families, labour and academics and low income and working families from Thunder Bay to Peel Region to Windsor. For 20 years, Campaign 2000 has carefully monitored child and family poverty and related social policies at the federal and provincial levels through our annual report cards on child and family poverty.

We are encouraged that the Ontario government is taking the time to create a renewed early years and child care policy framework. Campaign 2000 has consistently called for the creation of a universal child care system as it is a key element to reducing child and family poverty. The early years in a child's life are integral for their development and the importance of providing quality care for children and support for families during this time cannot be overstated. Families living in poverty in Ontario struggle daily to afford necessities including shelter, food and clothing. Regulated, high-quality child care is crucial among these essential services; however, families living in poverty struggle to both access and afford child care. Without a universal child care program, low income families and children will continue to be left behind, facing greater barriers to exiting poverty.

Ontario Campaign 2000 supports the submissions of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC). We recommend that the Ontario government ensure access to early learning and child care by creating a universal, high quality and affordable child care program across the province which is accessible, inclusive and responsive to all Ontario families with children.

Child and Family Poverty and Child Care

Child and family poverty continues to be a serious problem in Ontario. The most recent data show 18.8% of children under the age of 18 and 20.4% of children under the age of 6 live in poverty in the province.¹ In addition, 14.4% of Ontario families with children live in poverty, with the rate increasing to 30.4% for lone parent families.² Access to affordable, high quality and accessible child care is key component in addressing child and family poverty.

¹ <http://ontariocampaign2000.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ReportCardOntarioNov182016.pdf>

² <http://ontariocampaign2000.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ReportCardOntarioNov182016.pdf>

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Child care is a key issue for Ontario families with children, but poses a particular challenge for families living in poverty. With the increasing costs of necessities such as housing, hydro, and food, and the increasing precarity of employment in Ontario (with the growth of part-time, contract, temporary and shift work with low wages and few or no benefits), the issue of how to afford or provide for child care weighs heavily on the minds of Ontario families.

Ontario has the most expensive child care in Canada and long waiting lists for spaces. The median annual cost of child care for an infant in Toronto is \$20,800,³ which is more than the annual salary of someone working full time in a minimum wage job (\$20,388 before taxes). Decisions around child care are a heavy burden for Ontario families and have resulted in families - often women - making difficult decisions including reducing working hours, going into debt, and for some, not returning to the job market. Decisions to reduce working hours or delay returning to work significantly reduce lifetime earnings including pension contributions, contributing to higher rates of poverty among senior women.

The creation of a universal child care system that is adaptable to the current financial and employment realities of Ontario families would greatly assist families across Ontario and in particular, families living in poverty. A universal child care system would not only support parents' ability to participate fully in the workforce or pursue higher education to improve their qualifications, it would also greatly assist in addressing gender inequality, as referred to within the Gender Wage Gap report commissioned by the province.⁴ A universal child care system would also provide all children with a strong foundation for their well-being and life long development. Further, the creation of a universal and inclusive child care system that welcomes all children no matter their ability, family type, ethnicity, and/or income would assist in meeting an essential need for families living in poverty and those that experience higher rates of poverty due to systemic inequalities, including First Peoples, female lone parents, parents who live with disabilities and/or who are racialized.

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https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2015/12/They_Go_Up_So_Fast_2015_Child_Care_Fees_in_Canadian_Cities.pdf

⁴ https://files.ontario.ca/7198_mol_gwg_finalreport_eng_wa_08f_v2_1.pdf

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Ontario Campaign 2000 Response

Access

1) What does access to early years and child care program mean to you?

Access to early years and child care programs means ensuring that all parents/guardians (no matter income, geographic location, race, ethnicity, status, gender, sexual orientation, family type, and/or ability) are able to place their child/children in an early years and child care program of their choice. We agree with the CRRU definition of “access” meaning “all families are able to secure an affordable, appropriate (age, culture, language, parent schedule and convenience-appropriate) high quality regulated space in a service type (part-day, centre or home-based) that the parents choose.”⁵

Access to child care programs includes:

- being close to where families live and/or work (accessible by public transit, in rural areas, in low-income areas and areas with higher rates of racialized or lone parent families),
- being affordable for families with different levels of incomes,
- having enough age appropriate spaces,
- being able to serve children and families that have different abilities and/or special needs,
- respecting the diversity of Ontario families and not discriminating,
- having a system that is user-friendly and easy to navigate,
- being available when families need services (due to different work schedules), and
- being adaptable to changing family needs due to changing employment or family situations.

2) In your experience, what are the strengths of the current system and what are the biggest barriers to parents accessing licensed early years and child care programs in your community?

The strengths of the current system are that there are quality programs available and a dedicated child care workforce provides these services – although not enough of them. Family support programs (such as Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centres) provide stimulating programs for young children.

Because they are often free, they provide an opportunity for parents and caregivers of all incomes to connect to and interact with other families in their communities.

⁵ http://www.childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/CRRU%20response%20to%20consultation_Dec%2031%202016.pdf

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The biggest barriers to parents accessing licenced early years and child care programs are families' inability to afford the cost of licenced child care, a shortage of child care spaces and child care services not meeting the different needs of families relating to work schedules, accessibility needs, cultural appropriateness (specifically for First Peoples), and geographical locations.

Families with children who are living in poverty, struggle every day to juggle paying for the rising costs of housing, food and transportation. The cost of child care is an additional burden. The median child care costs in Toronto are \$1,736/month for infants, \$1,325/month for toddlers and \$1,035/month for preschool age children. These costs exceed or are a high percentage of the monthly income of a parent earning minimum wage, which is less than \$1700/month before taxes and transfers. This leaves some families with almost no money left to pay for shelter, food, and other essentials.

Further, many low-income families who must sign-up for long waiting lists for both a child care spot and a subsidy may have to decide whether to take a child care space before receiving a subsidy. Parents are faced with difficult decisions - either to try to pay for child care services by borrowing money and going into debt, or to lose the child care space. Families on low income also experience difficulties with the extra costs associated with their child being in a child care program, including paying for extra pairs of shoes, clothing, and a second set of diapering and other necessities. Many low-income families do not have funds to buy more than one pair of shoes for their children or some of the other items child care centres ask parents to supply. These additional costs need to be taken into consideration when calculating fees for families living in poverty.

Proximity to child care services presents another barrier for low income families. There may not be any child care programs close to where they live or work, or the closest child care program may not be close to public transit options. This increases the cost of child care for low income families as they may need to pay for more transit trips to pick/drop off their children, or pay for more gas.

Current child care services also do not support the diverse employment-related needs of Ontario families. Many low-income families are precariously employed, in part-time, contract or temporary work or reliant on shift work, but there are very few child care services that have flexible hours. Many child care services operate from 7am to 6pm. These hours do not accommodate parents/guardians who travel long distances to and from work. Those unable to pick up their children before centres' closing time end up paying expensive late fees as they are charged by the minute.

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Families who are marginalized and experience higher rates of poverty face additional barriers in accessing child care services. There are very few services that are culturally appropriate to the needs of First Peoples' and their children and the programs that exist are underfunded. There is a lack of available spaces for children who have needs relating to disabilities. Child care waiting lists and subsidy programs can also be incredibly difficult to navigate for newcomers or other parents who are not proficient in English.

3) In your experience, what can be done by governments, communities, employers and providers to increase access to early years programs and licenced child care?

The Ontario government must commit to and create a universal, high quality, affordable child care system in Ontario with a set of targets and timelines for implementation, and sufficient and sustainable public funding. This must include funding for both the capital costs and program operational costs for licensed child care centres. Further, in creating a universal, high quality, affordable child care system the province must address the access barriers discussed above through planning and creating comprehensive policy frameworks to ensure child care is accessible to all families who want it.

The municipal government should work with communities to ensure new spaces are prioritized in areas with the most need and all areas have access to child care services.

Employers should have flexible work schedules to accommodate employees with care giving responsibilities. Further, employers should provide employees with predictable and stable schedules. This is important to enable employees with children to coordinate child care.

Child care providers should create flexible child care hours in centres to meet the changing workplace schedules of parents/guardians.

Responsiveness

1) Do parents have the early years and child care options they need?

Families do not have the early years and child care options they need. Families of all incomes are struggling with the lack of child care options available to them as there are not enough quality licenced



child care spaces available for the number of children in Ontario. Child care services are unaffordable which limits the child care options available to low income families.

Child care hours are out of sync with the reality of many of today's families' work schedules. Many low income families do not have standard working hours and/or stable work schedules, as described above. As a result, families may need child care for shorter or longer periods, or during non-standard hours. The lack of resources in the system constrains the services child care centres can offer, resulting in strict rules and fixed hours that do not adequately support working families who do shift and contract work outside of standard 9am to 5pm employment hours.

Children with specific cultural and access needs also do not have adequate options available to them. Early years and child care services both on and off reserve for First Peoples that are culturally appropriate are underfunded and must be expanded. Ontario families that have children with different accessibility needs also have limited options available for child care services. Many services are not accessible and services which are may not be close to where families live.

2) What are the strengths of the current system and options available? What can be done to provide your family with more choice and flexibility?

The strengths of the current system and options available include the work of some exemplary child care programs that can be seen across the province which provide quality services to the families they serve.

We note the importance of the government's action in prohibiting the practice of charging families who are wait-listed for child care spaces. This practice presented barriers for families across the province, especially those in low income.

The Ontario government must commit to and create a universal, high quality, and affordable child care program for Ontario with clear targets and timelines and that is responsive to the diverse needs of families in Ontario. This must address the specific needs of families living in poverty by ensuring that there are 24hr services for families who work outside of a 9-5 schedule, including those who have shift work and work non-standard hours.

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Affordability

1) What does an affordable child care system look like to you?

An affordable child care system would ensure that all families no matter their income could choose to place their child/children in a licenced child care program without experiencing severe financial burden. Severe financial burden may include, but is not limited to, accumulating debt and being unable to pay for necessities including food, hydro, housing, etc. due to childcare costs.

An affordable child care system should not be reliant on parent fees. The government must provide base operational funding and any parent fees should be geared to income. An affordable childcare system must be equitable, and child fees should be based on parents' ability to pay. Additionally, the costs of additional fees or resources, including additional clothing, shoes or diapers, would factor into fee-geared to income calculations. Child care fees should be established in consultation with key stakeholders including, community members, child care advocates, researchers and child care workers.

2) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the subsidy model in Ontario?

There are many weaknesses in the subsidy model in Ontario, resulting in an ineffective system. As previously stated, families who qualify for a subsidy are not necessarily guaranteed to receive one. If a family receives a child care spot before their subsidy is approved they must pay full price for child care services even if they are unable to afford it. This leaves low-income families in a difficult and precarious situation regarding where to place their child and how to manage their finances.

The rules surrounding which families can obtain a subsidy also make it difficult for low income families. Regulations around minimum income for families who are self-employed disproportionately impact female lone parent families, as there is a minimum annual salary cut-off that they would have to earn to be eligible for a subsidy. This further marginalizes female lone parents (who already experience higher rates of poverty), who may run a small business or work contract to contract as an artist, for example.

The high cost of child care in Ontario is not only a burden for low income families but also out of reach for many middle and high income families. The subsidy cut-off eligibility does not address the financial

strain of the high child care cost and the difficulties that all families have in paying for the associated fees.

The subsidy model in Ontario must be replaced by a universal child care system that is affordable for all Ontario families. Such a system requires sustained funding, with the province providing base operational funding, and which ensures any associated fees are not a burden on parents.

3) What are the most important things governments, communities, providers and employers should do to make early years programs in Ontario more affordable?

The most important thing that the government, communities, providers and employers should do to make early years programs in Ontario more affordable is to create a universal, high quality, and affordable child care program across Ontario that is accessible, inclusive and responsive and guided by clear timelines and targets for implementation. The government must move away from a child care system that is reliant on parent fees. The province must commit to providing sustainable base operational funding.

Quality

1) What does a high quality early years or child care program look like?

A high quality early years and child care program should encompass a holistic understanding of the needs for a child's well-being and development. A high quality early years and child care system should be framed within an ecological framework, which provides an understanding of how programs support families, child care employees and communities. A universal, high quality and affordable child care program can support families who work and/or want to access training or upgrade their skills. It can also contribute to women's equality by providing women with young children more choice to pursue employment and educational opportunities. Staff and governance of centres are the foundation of quality. Sustaining employment that values the skills and expertise of early childhood educators and staff is essential to quality, contributing to staff retention, consistency in care and to the stability of the system to best serve parents and children. Quality care must also meet the needs of families, being both flexible and available, but also affordable to all.

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Research shows that the common obstacles experienced in implementing a high quality early years or child care program relate to structural weaknesses resulting from poorly developed and implemented educational theory, lack of adequate financing, poorly qualified and inadequately paid staff and unfavourable staff to child ratios.⁶ To address these obstacles, research and analysis identifies key elements which must be collectively utilized to create a high quality early years and child care program. These elements include; ideas, governance, infrastructure, planning and policy development, financing, human resources, the physical environment, data, research and evaluation.⁷

2) What roles should the province play in ensuring high quality early learning and child care programs?

The province has an integral role in creating a high quality early learning and child care program. It should commit to and focus on creating a universal, high quality and affordable child care system that is accessible, inclusive and responsive to all Ontario families. This must be based on research and evidence that has proven to improve quality. In addition, the province must have an understanding of the elements of creating a high quality early learning and child care program which include; ideas, governance, infrastructure, planning and policy development, financing, human resources, physical environment, and data, research and evaluation.⁸ The province's role should include establishing standards of quality of care and monitoring; providing improved wages, training and education to early child care educators; assessing quality based on clear goals, supporting child care provision through public/non-profit child care services; engaging in planning and research; and providing adequate and sustainable financial support.

3) How should we measure quality in our early years and child care programs?

The province should develop a quality measurement guideline with proven indicators to monitor and assess early years and child care programs. These should be based on the elements needed for a high quality early learning and child care system as discussed above. This includes having clear definitions of the roles and responsibilities of different levels of governments, assigning a public authority to manage the service, and implementing mechanisms for ongoing quality assessments. These quality indicators should be developed in conjunction with child care experts, researchers and other stakeholders.

Further, there must be an understanding that improving quality is a continuous component of policy

⁶ http://www.childcarequality.ca/wdocs/QbD_Elements.pdf

⁷ http://www.childcarequality.ca/wdocs/QbD_Elements.pdf

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creation, and thereby reviews and monitoring should be regularly scheduled with the ability to address changes which may need to take place to increase quality measurements.

Recommendation

Given the Ontario government’s commitment to reduce child poverty through its Poverty Reduction Strategy, Ontario Campaign 2000 recommends that the government commit to and create a universal, high quality and affordable child care system. This system must be accessible, inclusive and responsive to all Ontario families with children. In addition to the creation of a universal child care program, we also recommend setting clear targets and timelines for its implementation.

A “Shared framework for building an early childhood education and care system for all”⁹ was previously developed by CRRU, Canadian Child Care Federation, Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada and Campaign 2000. The document, along with these recommendations, provide a strong foundation for transforming early years and child care in Ontario and building a better future for children and families.

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https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/childcareon/pages/1368/attachments/original/1453824228/Shared_framework_for_an_ECEC_system_for_all.pdf?1453824228

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