



Child and Family Centres – A Part of the Vision of an Early Learning System for Ontario

By Kim Hiscott

June 15th marked the first anniversary of Dr. Pascal's report "With our Best Future in Mind" and what a busy year it was. While the focus of this first year has been on the implementation of full-day learning, many of us have also spent time reading and re-reading the 20 recommendations, identifying how we can assist in the creation of a seamless integrated system to support children and families and considering the question, how we can get there from here?

The report identifies that the current governance, funding and legislative mandates do not allow for true integration and effective sharing of resources. Dr. Pascal challenges us to consider how the children's services sector can transition from a patchwork of well-intentioned independent services to an actual early learning system for Ontario. Recommendation number three states that: The Early Years Policy Framework should also guide the transformation of programming for Ontario's youngest learners. Municipal authorities, with the necessary resources, should be mandated to plan, develop, support, and monitor an integrated network of Best Start Child and Family Centres providing families with:

- flexible, part-time/full-day/full-year early learning/care options for children up to age 4;
- prenatal and postnatal information and supports;
- parenting and family support programming, including home visiting, family literacy, and playgroups;
- nutrition and nutrition counselling;



Imagine being an ECE employed by a full-service agency confident in your awareness and ability to support families, either directly or by identifying additional program options available to them, integrated within your site of service.

- early identification and intervention resources;
- links to special needs treatment and community resources, including libraries, recreation and community centres, health care, family counselling, housing, language services, and employment/training services.

Most of us will agree that within our current structure there are amazing examples of quality programs and successes to be acknowledged; children and families have been accessing



children's services for a very long time and Dr. Pascal urges us to capture and highlight these programs as future models. But in the same breath most of us also question whether it is realistic to sustain and grow what has been created largely based on a community development model. Can we expect volunteer Boards to continue to develop and govern community based programs?

As a full service agency with broad community connections, the Board and management team of Andrew Fleck Child Care Services embraced the recommendations in the report. We were inspired to dream big, to think of the possible and the positive and to move from reflection to action. As a first step we invested time in strategic planning for the Board and management team as well as planning within each program team and service we currently offered. We identified the importance of everyone in the agency understanding the report and developed a shared vision with staff that strengthened our internal communication strategies to support understanding. By engaging the whole agency, including our 100+ staff and Board, in a review of our vision, mission and values, we sought out opportunities to connect with other leaders from the children's services sector. We felt that we needed a starting point to support conversations within our agency. By interpreting the recommendations into a vision and by developing principles identifying what a Child and Family Centre could look like, we were able to share our ideas effectively. With the hope of inspiring conversations, we share our ideas.

Child and Family Centres need to be driven by integration not coordination: we believe that Child and Family Centres (CFCs) should consolidate existing multi services to ensure a full service program approach. This will enable equitable access to a continuum of services that include non-parental care, early intervention, health and family support services. Within a mandated designated service area, based on population, CFCs programs and services will be of high quality, will engage parents in a meaningful and responsive way, will be flexible and recognize the complex needs of families. Most importantly CFCs will improve access to children's services.

The vision is one where every neighbourhood shall have access to a Child and Family Centre that offers one-stop services and supports for children and families.

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Imagine being the administrator, program supervisor or director relieved of multiple, time consuming administrative tasks that you know are being duplicated by other stand-alone programs in close proximity to you. You would now have the time to spend supporting the quality and development of the service you offer through coaching, mentoring and pedagogical leadership.

Imagine a system of integrated children's services based on an understood minimum level of service supportive of each family with additions based on unique community need.

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Imagine never hearing from a family, “oh I wish I knew about that service when my children were young.”

We will know we have successful integration, not simply coordination or co-location, when we have consolidation of resources, governance and mandates of child care and family support services. To be efficient and effective CFCs should be operated by one employer with a consolidated budget out of single or multiple locations that are linked to a neighbourhood of schools.

Preparing for change:

Most of us involved in the children’s services sector recognize the need for system change; overlapping mandates, funding challenges and administrative responsibilities that affect the ability of agencies to offer high quality services are ongoing frustrations. The harder part is seeing ourselves, our agencies and programs as a part of the changing system given that we all have a vested interest in our communities. A common question posed by staff at Andrew Fleck is “will there be a role for me in the new system”. Our response as an agency has been

“absolutely”. We believe that there will be changes; programs may amalgamate, alter mandates, or expand. Individuals may work for different employers but the need for our individual skills and talents will continue, and there will be new opportunities to apply them.

In Ontario there has never been a better time to be an ECE. The professional recognition we achieved through the College of ECEs and the expected creation of 20,000 new positions for those interested in working in school board full day learning programs is practically a guarantee of interesting employment. We feel that the time we have spent as an agency identifying our strengths, communicating our ideas, identifying potential partnerships and linking with our local Best Start Planning Tables has been well spent.

As Andrew Fleck Child Care Services prepares for our 100th anniversary next year we have been spending a lot of time reflecting on where we have come from and where we are going. We have identified that the only consistency in our history is change. Once again, exciting times are ahead!

Kim Hiscott is the Executive Director of Andrew Fleck Child Care Services.

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