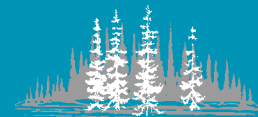


# In the Best Interests of Children and Families:

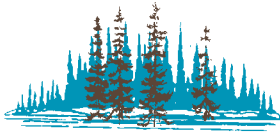
A Discussion of Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta



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# Dedication

Ms. Judy Padua, the former Executive Director of the Clifford E. Lee Foundation and a Member and Director of The Muttart Foundation passed away, far too early, in July 2008.

Ms. Padua was a strong and determined advocate for high quality early learning and care for all Alberta children and their families. With her guidance, and through a generous legacy gift from the Clifford E. Lee Foundation, The Muttart Foundation began its own work in the field of early learning and care in fall 2003.



# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Preface	iii
Introduction	1
What We Know about Alberta’s Families	4
What We Know about Early Childhood Education and Care	8
What We Do – Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta	14
What We Could Do – A New Approach to Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta	20
A Concluding Word	28

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Ms. Jane Bertrand, a Professor at George Brown College, School of Early Childhood served as the lead researcher for the paper and worked closely with Foundation staff in its development and writing.

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These individuals gave freely and generously of their time assisting the Foundation staff and Ms. Bertrand in all phases of the work.

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# Preface

The lives of families with young children today are very different from those of even the most recent past. Within the space of two generations, family life and the raising of young children has undergone a series of profound changes. Families are more varied in their form and structure, and today's young children are the first to spend a significant portion of their early lives in some form of non-parental care.

These changes take on an added significance given the results from the rapidly developing field of brain research and the findings from longitudinal child development studies. Both confirm what parents and those that work with young children already know; that early childhood experiences have a significant impact on shaping behavior and that positive, stable relationships and nurturing environments during a child's early years provide the basis for a lifetime of healthy growth and development. In short, the experiences of the early years can indeed last a lifetime.

While the importance of helping all children get off to the best possible start in life is clear, how this is best achieved with the support of well-developed public policy and appropriate services remains more challenging. As numerous international studies reveal, Canada has fallen behind other developed nations in its support for early childhood education and care. And while some provinces are making progress in their supports for children and families, others are finding it difficult to move ahead with vision and purpose.

The Muttart Foundation has prepared the current paper to encourage discussion of how Alberta can best approach its support for early childhood education and care. A parallel paper aims to encourage a similar discussion in Saskatchewan. The Foundation considers early childhood education and care a public good that benefits all children and families. It sees public support for early education and care as a prudent investment that has the potential to foster child development, to support families, and to help address the inequities in opportunity that appear early in a child's life.

The paper, written with input from researchers and practitioners, is a starting point. The discussion of how best to support children and their families requires the input of many stakeholders and must take into account different values, ideas, and experiences. It must acknowledge and make sense of competing interests while remaining grounded in what research tells us about early childhood education and care.

At minimum, the development of sound public policy, and the implementation of effective supports for children and their families, requires a deep understanding of the issues central to early childhood education and care. It also requires a vision of an Alberta in which all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential: one that remains in the best interests of children and their families.

# Introduction

The majority of Alberta children 0 to 6 years of age participate in some form of non-parental early childhood education and care. This new reality for Alberta's families makes early childhood education and care an important topic for discussion and raises key public policy questions about how best to support families with young children.

Arguments for the public support of high quality early childhood education and care emphasize the rights of children to learning and care and highlight the shared responsibility of ensuring that all children have equitable access to the opportunities they need to reach their potential. These arguments draw on the scientific research, which affirms the importance of early childhood as a critical period for growth and development, and consider public expenditures on early childhood education and care as investments with economic and social returns. Arguments for more limited public support emphasize the primary role and responsibility of parents to meet their young children's education and care needs, question the value of universal early learning and care programs for young children, and raise concerns about the public cost of funding and delivering them.

In Alberta, as in much of Canada, the goals for early childhood education and care, as well as its funding and delivery, reflect the tensions between the above arguments. Three main government ministries share responsibility for early childhood education and care, albeit with different mandates and approaches to the funding and delivery of service. Most services for children younger than five years of age are delivered

through a market model, in which parents purchase the services they need. There is some direct public support for service delivery and targeted public support for families who are in some way disadvantaged. Children with diagnosed delays or disabilities are also eligible for additional public support through the school system. Children five years of age and over have access to publicly funded half-day kindergarten, with some full-day programs available for children who require higher levels of support.

Families' access to early education and care varies by the age of their children, their household income and, in some cases, by where they live. Publicly supported services for children under five are often not accessible to the families that need them, and many parents face difficult choices in how best to support their children's early education and care.

*In The Best Interests of Children and Families: A Discussion of Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta* invites Albertans to consider how the province might best approach the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care for current and future generations of children and their families. Within the paper, early childhood education and care refers to the broad array of programs and services for children below the mandatory school age of 6 that involve the elements of both physical care and education.<sup>1</sup> Early childhood education and care services include centre-based child care, family day homes, preschools, Head Start programs, prekindergarten and kindergarten programs as well as some emergent forms of care, such as Kin Care, which is unique to Alberta.



The primary audiences for the paper include early childhood professionals and representatives from early childhood education and care organizations, post secondary early childhood educators and researchers, and local, regional and provincial policy makers. The secondary audiences include parents with young children and individuals and organizations with a more general interest in child and family well-being.



The paper includes *four* main sections:

- ***What We Know about Alberta Families*** presents a profile of Alberta’s families with young children. It highlights recent changes in family life and considers what Alberta families tell us they need and value in early education and care.
- ***What We Know about Early Childhood Education and Care*** highlights what the research tells us about children’s early learning and care, summarizes the key elements of high quality early education and care programming, and provides some examples of how other jurisdictions, inside and outside of Canada, fund and deliver early childhood education and care.
- ***What We Do – Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta*** describes the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care in Alberta. It summarizes the programs and services currently available and outlines how they are funded and delivered.
- ***What We Could Do – A New Approach to Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta*** draws on the discussion in the first three sections to propose a more comprehensive and integrated approach to funding and delivery of early childhood education and care. It outlines strategies to redesign and expand existing services to provide all children with equitable access to high quality learning and care. The strategies are preliminary and intended to generate a discussion of how Alberta might best support the early education and care of its youngest citizens.



# What We Know about Alberta Families

**T**he daily lives of Alberta families with young children reflect the province's dynamic economy as well as the larger social changes taking place in Canada and beyond. Parents and families continue to play the central role in raising their children, albeit with the help and support of others outside of the family. Inevitably, parenting involves a series of interdependencies that connect families to their communities.

The first homesteading communities on the Prairies included many young families. These families relied on each other, as well as emerging community institutions, to support and nurture their young children. New mothers benefited from the knowledge and skills of more experienced mothers in the care of their newborns, while ladies' auxiliary groups, church socials, and schools provided support to families with young children. One-room schools often accommodated toddlers who came along with their older siblings, while Sunday schools provided preschoolers with exposure to games and stories that developed their language, attention, and memory. Social gatherings brought families together and provided young children with a sense of belonging and community.

While the lives of Alberta families today are very different, some important things remain the same – parenting is a learned skill; parents must balance the

demands of raising a family with those of work inside and outside of the home; families draw support from the communities to which they belong; and young children benefit from opportunities to play and learn with other children.

## Alberta Families with Young Children

Alberta stands out as the fastest growing province in Canada, with an increasing national economic influence. The dynamic and cyclical nature of the resource economy shapes much of the province's growth and prosperity, which in turn impacts the province's families and their way of life. Alberta continues to be a destination and home for families with young children – although these families now look different from those of even a generation ago.

### An Increasingly Urban Population

Alberta is increasingly an urban province. Over 80 percent of Albertans live in towns or cities. The metropolitan areas of Calgary and Edmonton account for close to 65 percent of the provincial population. Both cities are the major destination points for families who move to the province and both are amongst the fastest growing urban centres in the country.<sup>2</sup>

### A Province of Young Families

Alberta's population is young and growing. There are more than 900,000 census families – one in five of which includes children under six years of age. In comparison to the rest of Canada, Alberta has a higher proportion of married parent families with young children aged 14 and under and smaller proportions of families headed by common-law couples or single parents<sup>3</sup>; although, common-law couple families represent the fastest growing family type.

Between 2001 and 2006, the number of families grew at a rate double that of the national average<sup>4</sup>, a result of higher natural rates of increase as well as a surge in the number of families moving to the province. The birth rate remains significantly higher than the national average<sup>5</sup>, and, based on median age, Alberta represents the youngest province.<sup>6</sup> Children under 15 comprise

one in five of the provincial population with 281,061 children 5 and under.<sup>7</sup>

Calgary and Edmonton are among the youngest and fastest growing major metropolitan areas in the country. Both cities have experienced recent 'baby booms' and are home for many of the families who moved to the province over the last decade.<sup>8</sup> The Edmonton, Red Deer and Calgary corridor region has the highest percentage of population under 15 years of age in the province.

The number of young families is also growing outside of the major urban centres – particularly in the northern regions of the province. Here the population is younger than in most other rural areas due to a rapidly growing Aboriginal community and the influx of younger adults and their families for work in the resource industry.<sup>9</sup>

### Changing Family Structures

Families headed by two married parents are the most common family type. The composition of families is becoming more varied, however, just as it is in other provinces, as families adjust to changing social and economic conditions.

Together, common-law couple and lone-parent families comprise one third of all families with children. One in seven children lives in a lone-parent family – a



proportion that has doubled over the last two generations of family life.<sup>10</sup>

Albertans, like other Canadians, now wait longer to start a family; and when they do, they generally have fewer children than previous generations. Over the last fifty years, fertility rates, while amongst the highest in Canada, have fallen, resulting in smaller size families.

The most significant social change in family life is the decline in the number of couple families with a single working parent. In the 1960's, 7 out of 10 young children lived in two parent families with a stay-at-home mother. Today, the majority of children live in families in which both parents work outside of the home. The labour participation rate for mothers with children less than 6 years old has risen from 35 percent in 1960 to around 70 percent in 2010. This increase has transformed family life and changed the way in which families balance the responsibilities of paid work, domestic work and raising children.<sup>11</sup>

### Increasing Diversity

Alberta's history is one of many cultures, languages and religions. Today's families reflect this historical diversity as well as more recent waves of international migration to the province.<sup>12</sup>

The province's strong economy continues to attract immigrant and refugee populations – particularly to the main urban centres. The Edmonton newcomer population grew by 14.9 percent between 2001 and 2006, outpacing the total growth of the city (10.6 percent) and the national growth rate for newcomers (13.6 percent). Calgary's newcomer population increased by 28 percent over the same period and accounts for two thirds of the growth in its working-age population. Visible minorities account for 13.9 percent of Alberta's population up from 11 percent in 2001 and less than 5 percent two decades ago.

The province is home to a growing Aboriginal population both on and off-reserve. The Aboriginal population is younger than the overall population and is growing at a faster rate. Around 6 percent of the provincial population reports an Aboriginal identity, with one in three persons of Aboriginal identity 15 years of age and under.<sup>13</sup>



## Alberta Families and Early Childhood Education and Care

Alberta families balance the competing demands of work, both inside and outside of the home, with those of raising children. The growing proportion of families who rely on two incomes for financial security, and the increase in the number of lone parents with young children, means that families must increasingly access external supports to assist them in supporting their child's development and care. As a result, most young children now participate in some form of non-parental care.<sup>14</sup>

What parents value in this support is becoming clearer, as are the areas in which parents want additional help. Parents report a lack of knowledge about infant and child development. They are not confident in their own parenting and often do not feel supported in their role as parents.<sup>15</sup> The knowledge gaps around child development also extend to the broader community of adults who interact with young children.<sup>16</sup>

Families value early childhood education and care that is flexible and affordable, and that provides them with choices in care arrangements.<sup>17</sup> They identify safety, staff training and educational activities as the most important criteria in selecting early childhood education and care and see the need for staff to have high levels of training. Families consider early childhood educators to be as important as elementary teachers in supporting child development.

While parents express a preference for care provided by a partner or family member, most families access care from external parties.<sup>18</sup> Families identify the need to improve the quality of care available and to provide them with more information, resources and

opportunities to access supports and services.

Albertans view raising children as the shared responsibility of families and society and not the sole responsibility of parents. They understand that families live in communities and that communities contribute to young children's health and well-being.<sup>19</sup> Albertans see a role for government and public investment in community resources that support families and young children. The majority support public funding for early childhood education and care, particularly for lower income families. Two thirds of Albertans consider Ontario's recent decision to implement full-day early learning for four- and five-year-olds a good idea.<sup>20</sup>

## Summing Up

Alberta is home to a growing number of families with young children. These families are more diverse than in the past, and family life has changed significantly over the last two generations. Today, the majority of parents of young children work in the paid labour force, and most children under five spend at least part of their early years in some form of non-parental care outside of the family home.

Families want early education and care for their children that is of a high quality and affordable. They want the flexibility to choose the type of care that meets their own family needs.

Albertans appreciate the needs of families and view the raising of children as a shared responsibility. They see the value of public investments in early childhood education and care.



# What We Know about Early Childhood Education and Care

**T**he science of the early years provides information on the kinds of experiences and environments that support early child development, as well as some cautions around those that do not. Research on early childhood education and care programs identifies the key service elements that make a difference in the lives of children and their families. Policy studies reveal how to fund and deliver early childhood education and care for large numbers of families with diverse needs.

Viewed together, these complementary fields of research help to inform how jurisdictions can best approach the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care with the twin goals of supporting families and promoting healthy child development.

## Children's Early Learning and Development

What we know about babies and young children has advanced significantly over the past three decades. Science not only confirms that early experiences are the foundation for lifelong learning, behavior and health, but also reveals that young children learn more, innovate more, feel more and care more than previously thought.<sup>21</sup> Children are natural, active learners. They are born curious about the world around them and have remarkable abilities to learn.

The main architecture of the brain is established early in a child's life. From early in pregnancy to the time the young child enters formal schooling and beyond, the brain develops at a continuous and rapid pace. Initial developments provide the platform for later developments.<sup>22</sup> A complex interaction of genetics, environmental influences and experience shapes how the young child develops and informs whether she has a stronger or weaker foundation for future health, learning and behavior.<sup>23</sup>

The first three years of life is a period of dramatic cognitive, social, emotional and physical development.<sup>24</sup>

Language, the regulation of emotions and foundational skills all emerge as children explore their early environments. From three to five years, they develop more complex social behaviours, have deepened emotional sensibilities, higher-order problem-solving skills and the cognitive foundations for literacy and numeracy. By age five, the time most children enter kindergarten, much of their foundation for learning is in place. They have established the basis for their own unique learning character and developed the important competencies of emotional, behaviour and attention regulation, logical thinking and creative expression.

Early childhood research describes how young children encounter their emerging worlds through a series of experiences and relationships. It confirms that it is the quality, timing and nature of these experiences and relationships that shapes a child's development.<sup>25</sup> Young children benefit from language-rich, stimulating experiences and nurturing environments. By contrast, adverse early experiences or the absence of appropriate sensory, social or emotional stimulation can impede a child's development.<sup>26</sup>

Play remains central to the child's early learning.<sup>27</sup> And it is through play, both structured and unstructured, that children develop the knowledge and skills that provide the foundation for their development.<sup>28</sup>

The nature of modern childhood, in which children spend much of their time outside of the family home, requires that they have access to rich learning experiences and supportive environments in their communities. While science confirms the importance of parent-child and family-child relationships, it also reveals the influence of experiences and relationships outside of the family home.



## High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care

Over the last four decades, empirical studies of small-scale programs and large-scale longitudinal studies clearly show the positive impact of high quality early childhood education and care programs on children's development, particularly those children considered in some way vulnerable.<sup>29</sup> Smaller Canadian studies reveal similar findings.<sup>30</sup>

Quality and consistency remain central to support early childhood development. High quality early childhood education and care programs emphasize strong relationships, provide stimulating and safe environments that support children's play and build connections between the child's learning inside and outside of the home. By contrast, mediocre or poor quality programs provide children with little or no benefit, and can even limit their early development.

### The Characteristics of High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care

Five characteristics of effective early childhood education and care programs stand out: knowledgeable and responsive educators; a coherent curriculum and pedagogical approach; physical environments designed for early learning; respect for equity, inclusion and diversity; and parental involvement.

Knowledgeable and responsive educators are the starting point for high quality early childhood education and care. Effective educators nurture children, help create rich early learning environments and intentionally sustain and extend learning opportunities.<sup>31</sup> Research studies recommend that a portion of staff in early



childhood education and care programs, including kindergarten, have university level training with a focus on early childhood education and child development.<sup>32</sup> High adult ratios and small group sizes help to enhance educators' interactions with young children.<sup>33</sup>

A curriculum and pedagogical approach, with goals for children's learning, guides decisions about what to include in the program and supports activities that foster children's development.<sup>34</sup> It provides structure to support the child's individual learning<sup>35</sup>, while respecting the child's interests and choices.<sup>36</sup>

The physical environment is an extension of the pedagogical approach. The design of the space, the arrangement of furniture, objects and materials all support a full range of children's play while ensuring their safety. Spaces are accessible with careful attention paid to the quality of the environments. Both indoor and outdoor spaces provide safe opportunities for children's play, independent problem solving, and inquiry.<sup>37</sup>

A respect for equity, inclusion and diversity are prerequisites for high quality early childhood education and care. The programs are inclusive of all children, regardless of ethnicity, ability or socio-economic status. They incorporate diversity and expose children to their own customs and traditions as well as the ideas and experiences of others. Children who are confident in their abilities and comfortable in diverse environments when they are young are more likely to become engaged citizens who value a democratic, pluralistic society. Early childhood education and care programs can be powerful interventions for children who experience developmental difficulties or who live in challenging homes and communities.

Effective early childhood education and care programs engage parents and other family members in their children's early learning and development.<sup>38</sup> Parents feel welcome and valued in the program. Educators learn from families about the lives and experiences of the children in their care and share ideas and strategies with them for early learning at home.

## The Funding and Delivery of Early Childhood Education and Care

Inside and outside of Canada, different jurisdictions fund and deliver early childhood education and care in different ways. A jurisdiction's approach reflects both its interest in early learning and care as well as its analysis of how best to support families with young children.

### Canadian Experiences

Outside of Quebec, early childhood education and care is funded and delivered through three distinct streams: education, regulated child care and family support programs. The provinces retain the primary responsibility for the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care, with the federal government playing a supporting funding role through provincial transfers. The federal government retains the capacity to play a national leadership role. Recent international studies highlight Canada's low level of public investment in early childhood education and care and the resulting limited access that families, outside of Quebec, have to high quality programs and services.<sup>39</sup>

Over the past five years, most provinces have increased their investments in regulated child care programs that support families' labour force participation. Despite these increased investments, regulated child care is still in short supply and most families rely on unregulated private care arrangements.

Regulated child care is often expensive – with standards around quality not well-developed.<sup>40</sup> Child care fee subsidies enable children in lower and moderate income families to participate; although fee subsidies are generally only available for families in which the parents are in the paid labour force. Further, the gap between the fee subsidy and the actual program fee is frequently too large to allow low income families to access regulated care.

The funding and delivery of early childhood education programs through the public education system is expanding across Canada. All five-year-olds are entitled to attend publicly funded kindergarten programs and about 95 percent do so.<sup>41</sup> New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Quebec offer full-day kindergarten programs for

children five years of age, and Prince Edward Island, Ontario and British Columbia will begin full-day kindergarten programs in 2010. About 40 percent of Canadian four-year-olds, and less than 10 percent of younger children, have access to early childhood education and care programs in the education system.

Provincial education systems increasingly serve younger children through a range of programs and services: parent-child programs, preschool programs, transition-to-school programs and early intervention programs. British Columbia, for example, has introduced a province-wide family drop-in program that offers early childhood education to younger children. It has further announced its intention to explore options for delivering universal, publicly funded early childhood education and care for four- and possibly three-year-olds.<sup>42</sup>

For many families, the current divisions in early childhood education and care funding and delivery policies present challenges. Outside of universal public education programs, such as kindergarten, families often have limited service options, which they must purchase privately from regulated and unregulated providers. There are often few connections between service providers. And programs in the education and social service sectors operate with different goals and mandates.

In recognition of the above challenges, a number of provinces have introduced strategies to integrate early childhood education and care services. For example, Ontario's full-day early learning and care programs for four- and five-year-olds include extended day options available to families. Regulated child care has transferred into the Ministry of Education and the proposed neighbourhood child and family centres will combine child care, family health and parenting programs for younger children and their families.<sup>43</sup>

In Quebec, the *Avenir d'enfants* is working in communities through local coalitions, schools, child care, community agencies, and local governments to create action plans for child and family support. Prince Edward Island has a single department for education and early childhood education and care programs. It is also re-organizing regulated commercial and non-profit child care programs into Early Years Centres, which will align with elementary schools. New Brunswick has nine integrated early child development centres that

bring regulated child care, preschool, early intervention and family support programs together and link them to kindergarten and schools.

Manitoba, Newfoundland, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia are all reviewing their funding and delivery of early childhood education and care and considering closer alignments between community programs and the education system. Ontario, British Columbia and New Brunswick each have curriculum and pedagogical frameworks for early childhood education and care, which include links to kindergarten.

### Experiences Outside of Canada

Many nations outside of Canada have moved towards more comprehensive, integrated approaches to the funding and delivery of early childhood education care, with public funding to support universal access.<sup>44</sup> Nine Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries integrate early childhood services for children from birth to age 6 under one government department. Early childhood education and care is seen as an important vehicle to support family well-being, to foster child development and to connect families to the communities in which they live.

Internationally, the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) have the most comprehensive approaches to the funding and delivery early childhood education and care.<sup>45</sup> Families have greater access to licensed child care for children 0 to 3 years of age and each country makes significant public investments in preschool education for children 4 and 5 years of age. These public investments support system planning, higher training levels for staff and the design of curricula to promote child development.

Other countries also make significant public investments in early childhood education and care. The majority of European nations, for example, now guarantee four-year-olds some form of preschool place, although the number of hours of service varies. In New Zealand, families have access to free, part-time, early learning programs for three- to five-year-olds, with working families able to purchase additional services to provide full-day support. Early childhood education and care programs are now also part of the education department and share a common curriculum with early schooling. In the United Kingdom, all three- and four-year-olds

are entitled to 15 hours of early education for 38 weeks per year before entering compulsory full-day schooling at age five. The Australian government has committed to provide every four-year-old child with access to a quality part-time early childhood education program delivered by a university-trained early childhood educator by 2013.

## Summing Up

The science of the early years has greatly increased what we know about young children and their early growth and development. It reveals the importance of children getting off to a good start in life and highlights the role

that stable, nurturing relationships, and stimulating environments, both inside and outside of the family, play in child development.

Studies of early childhood education and care programs clearly show that high quality programs can have a positive impact on children's development and represent good investments. Poor quality programs provide children with little or no benefit.

Across Canada and internationally, public investments in early childhood education and care are increasing with the goal of ensuring that all children have equitable access to high quality programs that meet family needs while supporting early childhood development.





# What We Do – Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta

**A**lberta's young children participate in a variety of early childhood education and care programs prior to entering Grade 1. These programs, which include preschools, regulated child care, Head Start programs and kindergarten, provide supports to families and foster healthy child development.

Alberta, in common with other provinces, has recently increased its public investment in early childhood education and care. The provincial government has set a goal for all families to have access to quality, affordable services that provide children with a safe and healthy start in life.<sup>46</sup> Despite these new investments, many families still face challenges in accessing high quality, affordable early childhood education and care. The funding and delivery of early childhood education and care is complex; and the various services frequently operate in isolation from each other with different mandates. While some communities have worked to align local services and supports, others have few programs outside of local schools.

A brief description of Alberta's early childhood and care services casts some light on how the province supports early education and care for young children and their families.

## The Funding and Delivery of Early Childhood Education and Care

Three main provincial ministries (Education, Children and Youth Services, and Health and Wellness) regulate and fund service delivery. Four local authorities (Child and Family Services Authorities, school boards, Alberta Health Services and municipalities - through the Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) program) share responsibility for the allocation of public resources, service planning and monitoring. Alberta Health Services and school boards deliver services, while Child and Family Services Authorities and FCSS programs primarily fund service delivery. Child and Family Services Authorities also monitor service delivery.

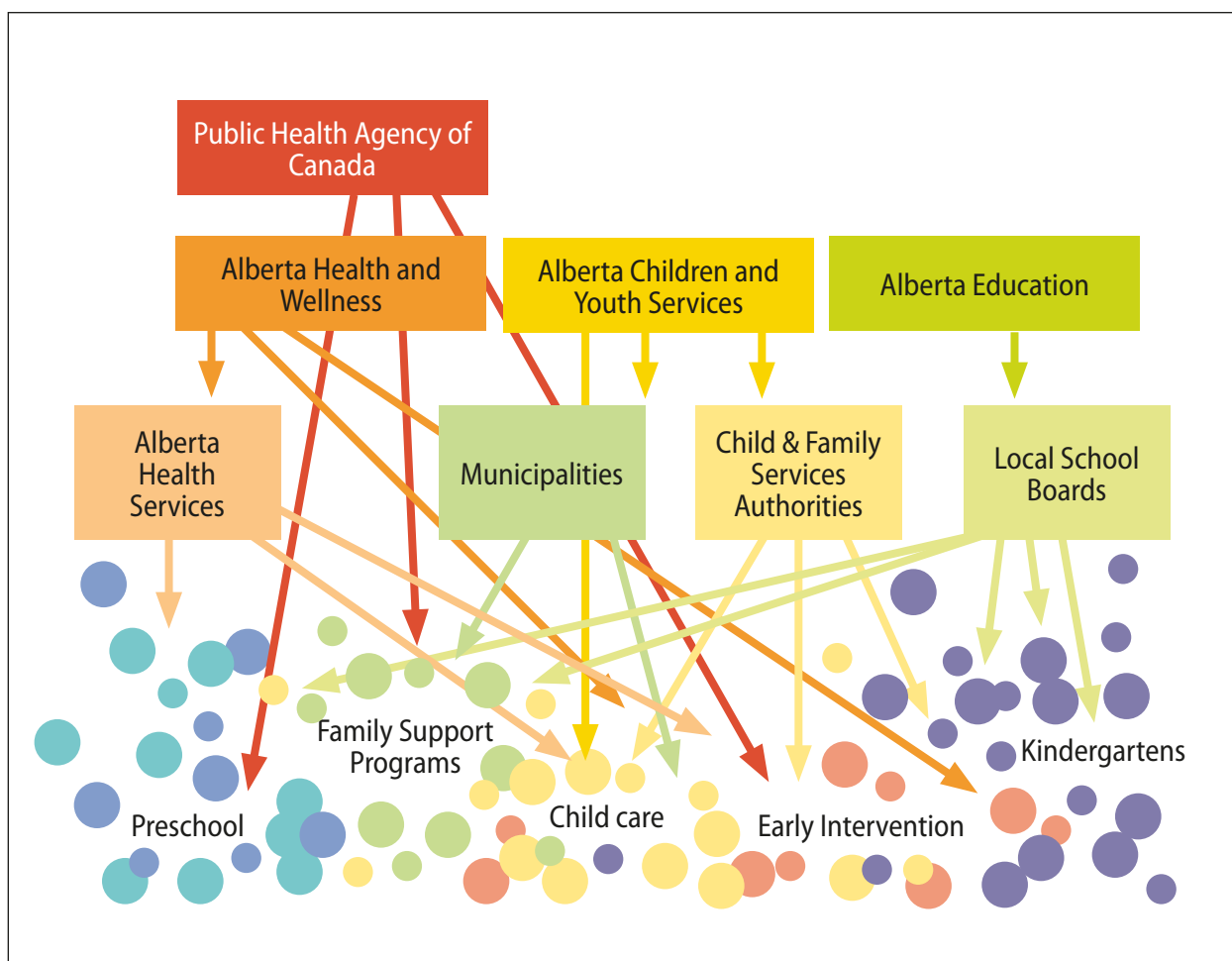
Local schools and community organizations (non-profit organizations and private businesses) deliver the bulk of early childhood education and care services. Alberta Health Services staff provides direct support to specific programs delivered through schools and community-based organizations. Four municipalities (Beaumont, Jasper, Drayton Valley and the MD of Opportunity) fund and deliver regulated child care.

Kindergarten and targeted early learning programs, such as Head Start, are mainly publicly funded, while parent fees are the main funding source for child care and preschool programs. The province provides fee subsidies for low and moderate income parents who access regulated child care as well as operational support to accredited (and pre-accredited) child care programs.

The division of roles and responsibilities for the funding and delivery of early childhood education is complex (see diagram below). The two main service components, community-based child care and Early Childhood Services have different service mandates and funding

guidelines. There is no early childhood education and care system as such, but rather a mix of public, private and community services. Services are further delivered in different ways in different regions of the province.

Annually, Alberta invests close to \$575 million in public funding for early childhood education and care.<sup>47</sup> The Ministries of Children and Youth Services and Education provide the bulk of these monies.



**Schematic Diagram of the Funding and Delivery of Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta**

(Adapted from Halfon, N. 2004. Early Childhood Systems Building. Presentation at Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services Symposium. November 24, 2004. Toronto, ON; and McCain, M., Mustard, F., Shanker, S. 2007. Early Years Study Two. Toronto, ON. Council of Early Child Development.)

## Early Childhood Education and Care Programs and Services

Alberta's early childhood education and care programs and services can be described on the basis of three major groupings: regulated child care and preschool programs, Early Childhood Services, and early intervention programs.

### Regulated Child Care and Preschool Programs

The Ministry of Children and Youth Services oversees the funding and delivery of regulated child care (centre-based, day home and Kin Care) and preschool programs for children from 0 to 6 years of age under the terms of the Child Care Licensing Act and the accompanying regulations. (The Ministry has recently taken on a similar role for out-of-school care programs).

Five hundred and sixty licensed child care centres, 90 approved family day home agencies and over 700 licensed preschool programs provide services at the community level. Private businesses operate the majority of child care centres (62 percent), while community-based organizations operate the majority of preschools (70 percent).

#### Families' Access to Services

There are over 44,600 regulated child care and preschool spaces in the province with a further 11,400 spaces in approved day homes and over 1,600 Kin Care spaces.<sup>48</sup> Since 2001, the number of spaces has increased over 15 percent, while the number of children 0 to 5 has grown by 20 percent. At present, there are regulated spaces for one in five children 0 to 5 years of age. In 2008, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services committed to create 14,000 new child care spaces for children 0 to 12. This initiative has supported the creation of new spaces across the province.

The distribution of services varies across the province. The Edmonton and Area and Calgary and Area regions (which are home to 65 percent of children 0 to 5 in the province) house three-quarters of the child care centre spaces, half the day home spaces, and 60 percent of the

preschool spaces. The Edmonton and Area region alone accounts for just over 40 percent of provincial child care centre spaces.

Overall, families in the Edmonton and Area and Southeast regions have the highest levels of access to centre-based and day home care (18 spaces per 100 children 0 to 5) while families in the Northeast, Northwest and East Central regions have the lowest levels of access (8 spaces per 100 children 0 to 5; 10 spaces per 100 children 0 to 5; and 10 spaces per 100 children 0 to 5).<sup>49</sup> Including part-time preschool spaces, families in the Southwest, Edmonton and Area and North Central regions have the highest levels of access to regulated care (24 spaces per 100 children 0 to 5; 23 spaces per 100 children 0 to 5; and 23 spaces per 100 children 0 to 5). Families in the Northwest and Northeast have the lowest levels of access (11 spaces per 100 children 0 to 5; and 14 spaces per 100 children 0 to 5). These overall regional levels of access mask local differences in families' access to regulated care.

The direct funding support Child and Family Services Authorities provide to child care centres and family day homes reflects these differences in service levels. The Edmonton and Area region provides the highest per capita investment of \$517 per child 0 to 5. The Southeast Alberta Child and Family Services Authority invests the second highest amount of \$473. The Northeast Alberta Child and Family Services Authority invests the lowest per capita amount at \$93 per child 0 to 5 years of age.<sup>50</sup>

#### The Cost of Regulated Child Care for Families

The average provincial monthly fee for a child care centre space is \$686 and \$513 for a family day home space. These costs vary on a regional basis. The highest average monthly fees for both centre-based and day home care are in the Northeast Region (\$1,085 and \$997), the Calgary and Area Region (\$764 and \$576) and the Edmonton and Area Region (\$703 and \$563)

The average monthly fee for a preschool program is \$104, with the highest average fee in the Northeast (\$200) and Northwest (\$169) regions of the province.<sup>51</sup> The average monthly fees for regulated child care exceed the maximum fee subsidies available to low income families.<sup>52</sup>

## Program Quality

The Child Care Licensing Act and regulations define minimum program standards, including staff training requirements. The Alberta Association for the Accreditation of Early Learning and Care Services supports program quality enhancements as part of a voluntary accreditation process. Accredited child care programs receive additional funding support to increase program quality (including staff wage enhancements).<sup>53</sup> There are 450 accredited child care centres in the province and 78 accredited Family Child Care agencies. Preschool programs are not eligible for accreditation.

As one broad indicator of quality, half of the staff in licensed child care centres are certified at the base Assistant level (the completion of 45 hours of formal training or equivalent), while four out of ten are certified at the highest Supervisor level (the completion of a two-year diploma or equivalent). In approved Family Day Home programs, two-thirds of staff are either not certified or have an Assistant level of certification, while one in six staff have a Supervisor level of certification<sup>54</sup>.

There are some regional variations in staff training levels in child care centres. Centres in the Northwest, the Edmonton and Area and the Calgary and Area regions have a higher proportion of Supervisor level staff, while centres in the North Central and Southwest regions have higher proportions of staff certified at the Assistant level.

There are no reliable data on the educational quality of regulated programs. At present, Alberta does not require regulated child care programs to follow an early learning curriculum framework.

## Early Childhood Services

Alberta Education provides early childhood education to an increasing number of young children through its Early Childhood Services. Early Childhood Services includes a range of strategies to support the development and early learning needs of young children, including kindergarten.

Close to 96 percent of five-year-olds attend kindergarten, while ten percent of three- and four-year-olds, those with identified mild, moderate or severe special needs, attend special education programs offered through their local school or an approved service provider. Beginning in 2007, Alberta Education also provides funding to help school jurisdictions offer programming to build language skills for children through the English as a Second Language and Francisation initiatives.

Alberta Education provides funding for a 475 hour kindergarten program. Over 1,300 kindergarten programs operate across the province in public schools and through community organizations. A growing number of school boards allocate instructional funds to support full-day kindergarten programs for five-year-olds as well as part-day junior or prekindergarten programs for four-year-olds.<sup>55</sup> School boards also access ECS funding to provide services to children with mild, moderate and more serious delays.

Staff in kindergarten and other ECS programs must have a valid Alberta Teaching Certificate, which requires completion of a Bachelor of Education degree.

In 2009, Alberta Education's Early Learning Branch launched the Early Childhood Development Mapping Project. This 5-year research project will provide school authorities, communities and parents with a comprehensive range of information on children's development prior to kindergarten. The Early Development Instrument is the anchor for the project.<sup>56</sup>



## Early Intervention Programs

Early childhood education and care programs also include additional services that target children with disabilities or developmental delays. A number of these programs operate as regulated preschools and receive some funding support through Early Childhood Services.

Head Start programs, for example, provide early learning and family support for low-income families. These programs take a variety of forms (half-day, full-day, Early, and Aboriginal) and receive additional funding from both provincial (for example, Family and Community Support Services) and federal sources (for example, the Community Action Program for Children). Some Head Start programs also access a range of primary health services. These programs are unevenly distributed across the province.

Alberta Children and Youth Services also supports 46 parent link centres, which provide a range of supports and services for families with young children, including some early learning activities. Alberta Advanced Education and Technology further supports a number of programs that focus on family literacy and early literacy.

## Summing Up

Alberta has significantly increased its investments in early childhood education and care. The current funding and delivery of services is complex and families' access to education and care varies across the province. Different programs and services operate with different mandates and are not linked together at either the provincial or regional levels.

The majority of services for younger children are delivered through a market model, with parents covering the bulk of the costs. Services for younger children with disabilities and or delays are publicly funded, as is part-day kindergarten.

In the main programs and services funded and delivered through the education system have a primary focus on early learning, while those delivered through community-based organizations place a stronger emphasis on child care and family support.





# What We Could Do – A New Approach to Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta

This final section of the paper draws on what we know about Alberta’s families and the importance of the early years of a child’s life to propose a new approach to early childhood education and care. It starts from the premise that if all Alberta children are to have equitable access to high quality early education and care from birth to kindergarten, then fundamental changes are required in how services are designed, funded and delivered.

It recognizes that significant changes to early childhood education and care will take time, require provincial and local leadership, benefit from community discussions, demand the commitment of new public resources, and rest upon government, communities, parents and service providers finding new ways of working together. Other provinces have begun to make similar changes. And Alberta has an opportunity to learn from these provinces’ experiences as it shapes its own approach to early childhood education and care – one that remains in the best interests of Alberta’s children and their families.

At this point, the alternate approach proposed and the

accompanying strategies for change are preliminary and sketched in outline form only. Consistent with the goals of the paper, they are intended to promote discussion and to help spur new thinking about early childhood education and care in Alberta. They are not the final word on its design, funding and delivery; but rather a basis for beginning important conversations about how Alberta can best support early education and care for its youngest citizens.

## **Towards an Alberta Early Childhood Education and Care System**

The starting point for a new approach to early childhood education and care in Alberta is the redesign and expansion of existing services to create a more comprehensive, integrated approach to its funding and delivery.

An Alberta early childhood education and care system

will need to be built over time and in incremental steps. It will require strong government and community leadership. It will need to transform the current mix of programs into an early childhood education and care system. It will reduce service gaps and provide children and their families with a continuum of high quality, affordable services. It will enhance and increase the quality of community-based child care programs and connect them with educational programs delivered through schools.

The following strategies, outlined under the headings *‘Setting the Agenda for Change,’ ‘Building a Continuum of Early Childhood Education and Care Services,’ ‘Financing Early Childhood Education and Care,’* and *‘System Planning and Management’* support the move towards a more integrated and comprehensive approach to the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care.



## Setting the Agenda for Change

### The Development of an Alberta Early Childhood Education and Care Framework

As a first step, Alberta Education and Alberta Children and Youth Services will work together, through a cross-ministry partnership, to develop a provincial early childhood education and care framework.

The early childhood education and care framework will consider the interests of children and families, reflect the research on early learning and support for families, and remain sensitive to the values and traditions that inform and shape Alberta. It will include a statement of the purpose and goals for early childhood education and care, as well as a supporting educational philosophy and early learning curriculum guide for children from birth to kindergarten. It will establish principles for the design, funding and delivery of service, and outline the roles and responsibilities of government, communities and parents in supporting high quality early childhood education and care.

Alberta Education and Children and Youth Services will engage parents and families, services providers, and early childhood educators and researchers in developing the framework. These stakeholders will provide a range of perspectives and experiences to inform the framework.

Once the framework is developed, the existing provincial legislation that governs the delivery of early childhood education and care services will be amended to reflect its key principles and goals.

In respect of the unique relations between First Nations communities and the federal government, the proposed Alberta Early Childhood Education and Care framework will not initially extend to reserve communities. First Nations communities are encouraged to work with the federal and provincial governments to consider how best to extend the framework to include on-reserve populations.



## **Building a Continuum of Early Childhood Education and Care Services**

Once a broad framework is agreed upon, work will commence on building a continuum of early childhood education and care services. The current services will require significant expansion and upgrading to provide all families with equitable access to high quality, affordable early childhood education and care.

### **The Expansion of Service – Increasing the Quantity**

The community organizations and private businesses that deliver the majority of child care services for children 0 to four years of age are small in size, have limited organizational infrastructure and often operate in isolation from other community services. They deliver services through a market model and rely on parent fees to cover the cost of services. With the exception of targeted preschool programs such as Head Start, these organizations face challenges in serving families with low or modest incomes and children with special needs.

At present, Child and Family Services Authorities have limited ability, other than through financial incentives, to help ensure that the supply of services matches the needs of families and communities.

### **Establish New Service Partnerships with School Boards and Municipalities**

To support a planned expansion of services, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, with the support of Alberta Education, will form new service partnerships with local school boards and/or municipalities to provide early learning and care for children up to four years of age.

The Ministry will work through regional Child and Family Services Authorities to provide participating school boards and municipalities with capital and operational funding to support the delivery of early childhood education and care.

Municipalities and school boards will enter into cost-sharing agreements with the Regional Authorities to support the delivery of service. The school boards or municipalities will commit to deliver high quality early childhood education and care at a reasonable cost to parents and families. Municipalities or school boards will deliver services directly or through arrangements with approved community-based early childhood organizations.

As part of the initial expansion of service, the Ministry will develop service partnerships with those school boards or municipalities that serve communities with the lowest levels of service and the highest levels of unmet demand for early childhood education and care.

## Implement Junior Kindergarten

Consistent with changes in early learning in other jurisdictions, Alberta Education will work with local school boards to establish junior kindergarten across the province for children four years of age. Junior kindergarten will be publicly funded and primarily half-day. Full-day early learning and care will be available for children considered vulnerable or at-risk of delay, and will build on programs currently in place, including Head Start and existing Early Childhood Services.

The initial implementation of junior kindergarten will focus on children considered vulnerable or at-risk of delay. School boards will have the option of delivering these services directly or through arrangements with approved community-based organizations (those eligible to receive Early Childhood Services funding).

Junior kindergarten staff, with a background and training in early childhood education, will use a play-based approach to support early learning and care.

Parents will have the option of choosing whether or not to enroll their children in junior kindergarten.

## Implement Full-day Kindergarten

In parallel with the implementation of junior kindergarten, Alberta Education will work with school boards to establish full-day learning for all students eligible for kindergarten. The goal will be to have full-day kindergarten available for all five-year-olds over a five year period.

Alberta Education will work with local school boards to identify those schools that are a priority for full-day learning as the first stage of implementation. Full-day kindergarten will be available at no cost to parents and will be provided through public schools or, according to local needs, approved community-based organizations (those eligible to receive Early Childhood Services funding).

Parents will have the option of choosing whether or not to enroll their children in kindergarten.



## **Linking Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten with Community Care**

As school boards implement junior kindergarten and kindergarten they will work with regional Child and Family Services Authorities to ensure that high quality, affordable, after-school-hour supports are in place for children and families who need them.

## **Strengthening Services – Increasing the Quality**

The quality of early learning and care across the province remains uneven. Differences in the funding and delivery of services between educational and community settings contribute to significant variations in the quality of programs – particularly in respect to staffing and supports for program delivery. Community services for younger children primarily focus on care, while educational services have a stronger early learning focus.

## **Increased Formal Training Requirements for Early Childhood Educators**

Consistent with the research that identifies the importance of staff education, the minimum formal education requirement for staff in regulated early childhood education and care will increase, over time, to a two-year college diploma. Alberta Children and Youth Services will provide bursary support to current early learning staff in accredited programs to assist them in reaching the required level of training.

In partnership with Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, the Ministry will also work with those post-secondary institutions that provide diploma level education for early childhood educators to increase the capacity of educational programs to serve students interested in working in early childhood education and care.

Further, staff who lead organizations will, over time, be required to have approved management training and to demonstrate pedagogical leadership. As above, Alberta Children and Youth Services will provide bursary support to existing staff in accredited centres to assist them in reaching the required level of training. The

Ministry, in partnership with Advanced Education and Technology, will work with post-secondary institutions to ensure that appropriate educational opportunities are in place.

## **The Establishment of an Alberta College of Early Childhood Educators**

The Ministry of Children and Youth Services will work with the Alberta Child Care Association to establish an Alberta College of Early Childhood Educators. The College will serve as the professional regulatory body for early childhood educators in the province.

Provincial legislation will establish the College's regulatory obligations. The College will develop the scope of practice for early childhood educators, support ongoing professional education, and establish and enforce professional standards.

All early childhood educators working in regulated settings must register with the College.

## **An Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework**

At present, outside of kindergarten, Alberta does not provide or require a curriculum for early learning and care. As a result, programs approach early learning in a variety of ways. A common curriculum framework for early learning has the potential to promote an even quality of early learning across programs, provide staff with guidance and support in program delivery, and support interactions between staff and parents.

The Ministries of Education and Children and Youth Services will work together to develop an early learning curriculum framework for use in all regulated early learning settings. The curriculum framework will outline learning principles for different age children and identify key learning areas for programs to include in their service.

In developing the Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework, the Ministries will seek input from early childhood researchers (including provincial policymakers from other jurisdictions with early learning frameworks or curricula) early childhood educators, and parents.

## Financing Early Childhood Education and Care

The research from Canada and beyond indicates that significant, consistent public investments are required to support high quality early education and care that is accessible and affordable. It further suggests that this funding is most effectively provided as direct support for the delivery of service (supply-side funding). Over time, Alberta will need to significantly increase its public investments in early childhood education and care – moving away from the reliance on a market model for the delivery of services for younger children.

### Increased Supply-Side Funding for Service Delivery to Children Four Years of Age and Under

The Ministry of Children and Youth Services will increase the public funding provided directly to regulated early childhood education and care programs. Families accessing service will continue to pay a portion of service costs, with low-income families eligible for a fee subsidy.

To ensure public accountability, approved programs will need to demonstrate a reasonable level of demand for service, meet regulated program standards (for example, staff education levels, adherence to the proposed curriculum framework) and provide programs that are inclusive (accommodate children with differing and special needs) and affordable (follow parent fee guidelines established by the Ministry).

Regional Child and Family Services Authorities, as part of their local service planning role, will determine the appropriate size and location of services, assess program standards and ensure that programs comply with established parent fee guidelines.

Regulated services that are determined surplus to local needs, or that charge parent fees that exceed the established fee guidelines, will still be able to operate – consistent with program standards – but they will not be eligible for direct public support, nor will they be eligible to receive parent fee subsidies.







## System Planning and Management

The broad goals set out in the Alberta Early Childhood Education and Care Framework will require planning and management at the provincial and regional levels.

### Provincial Planning and Management

The Ministries of Education and Children and Youth Services will assume a joint system-wide planning role to support the development and operation of a continuum of early childhood education and care for children prior to their entry into Grade 1.

The Ministries will retain joint responsibility for the development and implementation of policy and regulations relating to the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care. They will establish service delivery goals and collect data on service delivery outputs and, where appropriate, outcomes. These data will inform system planning and resource allocation at both the provincial and regional levels.

The two Ministries will also develop and implement a public communications strategy to raise the profile of early childhood education and care with parents and the public. The strategy will include specific initiatives that target populations in rural areas as well as Aboriginal and new immigrant communities.

## Regional Planning and Management

Regional Child and Family Services Authorities will work with school boards, municipalities and representatives of regulated early learning and care providers to develop regional service plans that are consistent with provincial service goals.

The regional plans will match the local service supply with community needs while taking into account specific regional priorities and circumstances. The plans will include programs and services delivered in school and community settings for children 0 to 5 years of age.

These regional service plans will form the basis for the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to allocate funding to support the local management and delivery of service for the children 0 to 4 and Alberta Education's allocation of Early Childhood Service funding (including junior kindergarten and kindergarten).



# A Concluding Word

**F**rom its rural origins to its present as a modern, vibrant province, Alberta has a history of supporting its children and families. If Alberta is to continue this history and deliver on its commitment to create opportunity for all Albertans, with strong communities supported by a public infrastructure, then significant new public investments in early childhood education and care are critical.

Increasingly, both within Canada and beyond, early childhood education and care is seen as a public good that benefits all families, as well as the broader communities in which they live. In recognition of this, most provinces have begun to reconsider and redesign how they fund and deliver early childhood education and care. The trend is to shift the focus away from either adding individual programs or improving the coordination of services to one of system building, with the goal of bringing a greater coherence, sustainability and quality to early childhood education and care.

While there are many examples of high quality early childhood education and care programs with dedicated and well-trained staff in Alberta, these services frequently operate in isolation. For the most part, individual families must find their own way through a mix of services that are insufficient in number to meet demand and of modest quality. This results in challenges for families, frustrations for early childhood educators and a poor use of public and private resources.

The recent changes Alberta has made to its funding and delivery of child care, as well as its rethinking of how it supports education<sup>57</sup>, suggest that the time is right for a broader discussion of early childhood education and care. A discussion that carefully considers its purpose, goals and impacts while remaining focussed on the best interests of children and families.

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<sup>47</sup> 2010/2011 Estimated Early Childhood Education and Care Spending

Early Childhood Education And Care Programs	Dollars (millions)
Child care subsidy and grants*	198
Special ECS	166
ECS – Kindergarten	185
Head Start/ Early Intervention	38
Total	587

\*Includes \$15 million in capital grants for new child care space creation  
Source: Government of Alberta. 2010. Budget 2010: Striking the Right Balance. Government of Alberta Strategic Business Plan and Ministry Business Plans 2010-13.

<sup>48</sup> Data provided by Alberta Children and Youth Services, June 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Per capita space calculations are based on child care space data provided by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services in June 2010 and population projections for children 0 to 5 years of age from Statistics Canada CANSIM Table 109-5325 (estimates of population, by age group and sex) and Statistics Canada CANSIM Table 051-0052 (estimates of population by census divisions, sex and age group).

<sup>50</sup> Per capita direct funding is based on Child Care expenses reported in the Child and Family Service Authority Statement of Operations for the Year ended March 31, 2009 and population projections for children 0 to 5 years of age from Statistics Canada CANSIM Table 109-5325 (estimates of population, by age group and sex) and Statistics Canada CANSIM Table 051-0052 (estimates of population by census divisions, sex and age group).

<sup>51</sup> Data provided by Alberta Children and Youth Services, June 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Parents must be employed or studying full time and meet income eligibility requirements for up to a maximum of \$607 fee subsidy for infants and \$ 528 fee subsidy for older children in child care centres and \$502 for infants and \$422 for older children in approved family day homes. Fee subsidy amounts are higher for the Northeast Region.

<sup>53</sup> Overview of Pre-Accreditation and Accreditation Funding

Funding Types	Pre-Accreditation Funding	Accreditation Funding
Quality Funding Grant – To improve the quality of programming and achieving accreditation standards	\$4000/year	\$7500/year
Staff Support Funding – A wage top-up for paid, certified day care staff, over and above wages paid by employer		
Child Development Assistant	\$1.44	\$2.14
Child Development Worker	\$2.70	\$4.05
Child Development Supervisor	\$4.42	\$6.62
Benefit Contribution Grant – Paid to operator to offset cost of the mandatory employer contributions needed to administer Staff Support Funding and Child Care Staff Attraction Incentive Allowance	16% of Staff Support Funding 16% of Child Care Staff Attraction Incentive Allowance	16% of Staff Support Funding 16% of Child Care Staff Attraction Incentive Allowance
Professional Development Grant – Education costs for certified staff to obtain higher levels of certification and attendance at approved conferences or workshops.	Up to \$1,000/yr	Up to \$1,000/yr
Child Care Staff Attraction Allowance – To reduce labour market pressures in child care in Alberta by attracting new and experienced staff to the sector	New Staff \$2,500	New Staff \$2,500
	Returning Staff up to \$5000	Returning Staff up to \$5000

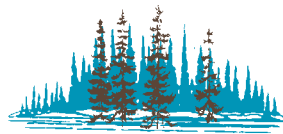
<sup>54</sup> Data provided by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services in June, 2010.

<sup>55</sup> *Every Child Learns Every Child Succeeds – Fifth Anniversary Retrospective Alberta's Commission on Learning Report* (2009) reports that an informal survey of Alberta school boards found that 37.8 percent of respondents have established junior kindergarten programs and 42.1 percent established full-day kindergarten programs in the last five years.

<sup>56</sup> The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is a questionnaire kindergarten teachers complete about students shortly after school entry. The teacher rates each child across five developmental areas: physical health and well-being, social competency, emotional maturity, language and thinking skills, and general knowledge. Communities can use the aggregated results to understand where young children have strengths and weaknesses, and to guide local program development.

<sup>57</sup> In 2009 Alberta Education held a series of public dialogues to consider the future of education in Alberta as part of *Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans*.





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