

With **Our Best Future** in Mind
Implementing Early Learning
in Ontario



In partnership with parents, full-day learning will provide Ontario children with high-quality programs that help lay the foundation for a healthy and productive life.

In November 2007, the Premier asked Dr. Charles Pascal to recommend the best way to implement full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-olds. This document provides the highlights of his advice. The full report, **With Our Best Future in Mind**, is available at www.ontario.ca/earlylearning.



Our Best Future

The most successful and innovative societies of the future will also be the best educated. Ontario is well on its way – our students are doing better in reading, writing, and math and graduating from secondary school in higher numbers. But we have more work to do when it comes to early learning.

More than one in four children who enter Grade 1 are significantly behind their peers. Many never close the gap and go on to be disruptive in school, fail to graduate, and are unable to fully participate in and contribute to society. Ontario cannot adequately address the challenges of the new millennium while leaving a quarter of children behind. We need to start earlier and do a better job of supporting children's learning.

Ontario has many good early childhood services, but they are disconnected, too often failing the best interests of children, frustrating families and educators, and wasting resources. We must make smarter decisions about how we design, manage, and fund early childhood programs if we are to achieve the educational, economic, and social goals made possible through quality early learning.

Establishing a strong foundation in the early years, and building on it, is the single-most powerful key to Ontario's social and economic future.

Our best future is one where all our children are:

- healthy and secure;
- emotionally and socially competent;
- eager, confident, and successful learners;
- respectful of the diversity of their peers.

Four Key Components of Early Learning

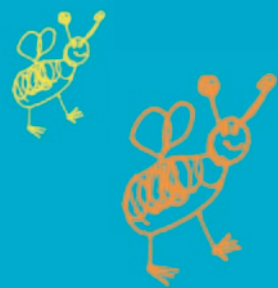
This new, comprehensive and transformational early learning plan for Ontario begins by recommending better use of the resources we have to create a system of services for children and families from the prenatal period to age 12, including the following:

1. FULL-DAY LEARNING FOR 4- AND 5-YEAR-OLDS

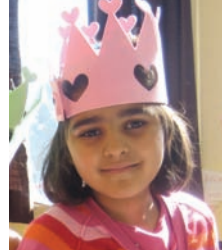
Children who attend full-day early learning programs have improved academic performance and social success when they enter Grade 1. To help students succeed, the plan recommends that:

- school boards offer full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-olds starting in September 2010, and that it be available province-wide within three years;
- parents have a choice about their child's participation, including the option of full-day or half-day attendance;
- fee-based programming (before and after traditional school hours and during the summer holidays) be offered at the request of 15 or more families;
- programs be staffed by well-trained teams of teachers and early childhood educators working with an established, consistent curriculum and approach to learning.

The report recommends that the first phase of implementation include lower-income neighbourhoods as part of the government's Poverty Reduction Strategy.



2. BEFORE- AND AFTER-SCHOOL AND SUMMER PROGRAMS FOR SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN



Quality before- and after-school and summer programming has been found to bolster academic success, particularly for disadvantaged children. The report recommends that new investments for full-day learning and the consolidation and reorganization of existing resources will allow schools to offer extended day and year-round programs for school-age children (6 to 12 years old) at the request of 15 or more families.

Adequately staffed by appropriately trained school board employees, these programs will offer homework help and recreational and other activities to enhance children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.

To meet the needs of older students (9 to 12 years old), school boards may contract with municipal recreation programs or community agencies to provide activities.

Programs operating before and after school and in the summer would be funded by parent fees, and subsidies for low-income families would be available.

Integrating early learning into a single program would result in significant savings for parents compared with the cost of traditional licensed child care for 4- to 12-year-olds.

3. QUALITY PROGRAMS FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

To support children and families during the earliest years of development, the report recommends that:

- the many existing child and family programs be consolidated into a network of Best Start Child and Family Centres under the systems management of municipalities;
- the Centres be located in or partnered with schools, and provide flexible full-day, full-year, and part-time child care for children up to age 4 (supported by parent fees and subsidies available for low-income families);
- the Centres be a one-stop opportunity for pre- and postnatal supports, parenting resources and programs, playgroups, linkages to community resources, help with early identification and intervention for children with special needs, and other early learning services.

Changes to child care fee subsidy eligibility will open participation to more children.

4. ENHANCED PARENTAL LEAVE BY 2020

Enabling parents to spend more time with their new baby creates a strong foundation for the child and decreases the need for expensive infant care. The report recommends that an improved parental leave and benefits program be established by 2020, and include:

- paid parental leave of 400 days after the birth or adoption of a child;
- six weeks of leave designated exclusively for the father or non-birthing parent;
- expanded coverage to include self-employed parents;
- flexibility for parents on leave to return to work part-time;
- 10 days of legislated job-protected leave annually for parents of children under 12.

The evidence is clear – experiences in early childhood have a major impact on future learning, work, health, and social and emotional makeup.

From Words to Action – Steps to Get Us There

In order to implement the early learning plan, Dr. Pascal indicates that the following is required:

RESOURCES

- Funding to support full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-olds
- Capital funding to accommodate full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-olds in schools
- Funding to support schools to provide before- and after-school and summer programs
- Parent fees to cover programs operating out of school hours and in the summer
- Support and funding to rationalize programs and adapt space for younger age groups
- Continued support for Best Start child care spaces now funded by the federal government



The report notes the need for special attention for Aboriginal children.

LOCAL MUNICIPAL LEADERSHIP

- Local service planning for a child and family system for children from birth to age 12
- Integrated early learning/care for children up to age 4 through municipal responsibility for consolidated planning, management, funding, and regulation of Best Start Child and Family Centres
- Continued municipal funding contribution

PROVINCIAL LEADERSHIP

- A new Early Years Division within the Ontario Ministry of Education to lead policy, funding, and accountability for programming for children from birth to age 8
- Over the longer term, a new, integrated Education and Family Supports Act

EARLY LEARNING PROFESSIONALS' EDUCATION AND TRAINING

- Enhanced early learning training for teachers and early childhood educators
- A specialty degree program for professionals working with children from birth to age 8
- More diversity in the early learning workforce

A COMMON PROGRAMMING GUIDE

- A consistent approach to early learning for children from infancy through to their transition into the primary years

MORE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ACHIEVING RESULTS

- Improved monitoring, evaluation, and public reporting on early learning outcomes



Full day learning is associated with improved reading and numeracy, smoother transitions to Grade 1, and increased post-secondary graduation rates.

