

Best Start

Ontario's Plan for Early Learning and Child Care

Ontario was pleased to sign a historic Agreement-in-Principle with the federal government on May 6, 2005 outlining our joint commitment to move forward on early learning and child care. The funds outlined in that agreement will enable us to expand and strengthen our child care system in Ontario, which is a cornerstone of our Best Start Plan.

This report includes a description of our Best Start Plan, as well as a preliminary action plan which describes how the new federal funding will be invested in Ontario. We look forward to working in continued partnership with the federal government, with our municipal partners and Ontario's parents - all of whom are instrumental to the delivery of quality early learning and child care in this province.



Our Plan for Best Start

July 2005

There are hundreds of thousands of compelling reasons why the government of Ontario created its Best Start initiative - Ontario's hundreds of thousands of babies and children. They deserve the best possible start in life to help them achieve success in school.

At its core, Best Start involves a massive expansion of quality and affordable child care and investments in every child's healthy early development - all in a convenient and easily accessible location for parents.

But it is much more than that.

Best Start is a partnership with parents and families, created in response to the clear message that Ontario's young children and their families need more integrated and accessible services, more high quality, regulated child care spaces, and more

subsidies so that more families can access those spaces. It is a long-term strategy that will be implemented over 10 years, beginning with an immediate expansion of child care spaces.

Best Start is also a comprehensive, evidence-informed system of services that seamlessly supports families with children from their birth through their transition into Grade 1. These services run the gamut from newborn and infant screening to hearing programs to speech and language therapy that help identify and provide support to children who need extra help for healthy early development. They include quality child care, public health and parenting programs that help parents help their children to be successful in school. And they put families in touch with other services that they might need.

Goals of Best Start

Children in Ontario will be ready and eager to learn and excel by the time they start Grade 1.

Ontario will be an international leader in achieving the social, intellectual, economic, physical and emotional potential of all its children.

Quick Facts

- In 2000-01, more than half of Canadian children were in some form of child care (up over 10 per cent from 1994-95); a quarter of these children were in a child care centre.
- Children who arrive in grade one ready to learn are more likely to complete high school and become caring, contributing members of society.
- Three quarters of Ontario parents in families with children under five work outside the home.
- The female employment rate in Canada is 76 per cent compared to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 64 per cent, and in two out of three two-parent families, both parents work.

From Education Goals Are Out of Reach by Michael Bator, with quotes from James Heckman; Ministry of Children and Youth Services; Early Years Study, April 1999; 2002 Study of Education by Mordechai Rozanski, Rotman Magazine August 2004, 2005. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Thematic Review of Early Childhood.

High quality, affordable, integrated early learning and child care programs

A key component of Best Start is to strengthen early development, learning and care services so that Ontario's children arrive in Grade 1 ready to learn and excel. The province will therefore create more licensed child care spaces and subsidies, strengthen early years programs, and provide funds to support improved wages for child care workers.

Ontario's immediate priority is to provide children in junior and senior kindergarten with quality child care during non-school hours. This will enable Ontario children to benefit from an integrated full day of learning and care at the same location or nearby.

Ontario will also work with municipalities in their key role to gradually increase the number of new spaces for infants and children up to age four. As part of its long-term vision, the Ontario government will provide a half-day early learning program and child care spaces for young children.

Effective November 2004, the province eliminated restrictions on child care subsidies for parents with RRSPs and RESPs. Now, Ontario is developing a new way to determine eligibility for child care subsidies based on income. The province will move to a sliding scale income test that municipalities will use to decide who is eligible for a child care subsidy. These measures will help a greater number of families access child care.

Early healthy development

Best Start builds on Ontario's ongoing prevention and early intervention initiative called Healthy Babies Healthy Children (HBHC), and Preschool Speech and Language and Infant Hearing programs.

Offered by Ontario's 36 Public Health Units, HBHC services include screening or assessment for all families with children at birth, right after birth, and/or up to age six for any risks to healthy child development.

Preschool speech and language and infant hearing programs identify, treat and support newborns and preschool children with communication disorders and their families.

Best Start is building on these services, and other key early years services like Infant Development, and Ontario Early Years Centres, to include checkups for all children at 18 months and vision screening. Early identification is crucial for helping children develop strong language and literacy skills.

While this is an important component of Best Start, the province will not direct the new federal early learning and child care funds toward these programs.



Providing expertise

The government has established three expert panels to guide Best Start implementation:

- The 18-Month Well Baby Expert Panel is developing strategies for a provincewide developmental assessment for every child in Ontario at 18 months of age
- The Expert Panel on an Early Learning Program is developing a learning program for preschool children that can link to junior and senior kindergarten learning programs, and ultimately become a single integrated learning program for children in preschool and junior and senior kindergarten
- The Expert Panel on Quality and Human Resources is looking at recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood education professionals and ways to improve quality licensed and informal child care.

The province is also proposing to introduce legislation that, if passed, will provide for the establishment of a new College of Early Childhood Educators, which will set out the qualifications and standards for professionals who work in early learning and child care.



Showcasing Best Start in communities

The province is accelerating Best Start implementation in three communities - Hamilton's east end, the rural areas of Lambton and Kent, and the District of Timiskaming - to learn and share best practices that may help guide the implementation of Best Start over the long-term.

The demonstration communities are moving forward quickly. They have all established their Best Start networks and are now developing their plans for what the full Best Start vision will look like in their communities. These plans are to be completed by October 2005.

Simplified point of access

The ultimate goal of Best Start is a network of early learning and care hubs, centrally located in communities so they are convenient for families. These hubs will offer a single integrated, seamless point of access to services and supports based on local needs and available resources.

Given that Best Start is designed to help provide children with the supports they need to facilitate their transition into a formal school setting, new or existing English-language and French-language elementary schools are the first choice for the expansion of child care space. Where local family requirements, physical space, accessibility, safety or francophone, aboriginal and ethnocultural needs make it

impractical to expand child care in a particular school, that community can consider expanding to other locations.

These could include child care centres, Ontario Early Years Centres, community centres or home-based child care programs located near schools.

What you'll find at early learning and care hubs

- Children will be screened and assessed in all aspects of their development
- Children and parents can access early learning and care and parenting services
- Children can be referred to other more specialized services such as mental health and speech and language resources
- Parents can access flexible programs at times convenient to their needs.

Showing the way

Ontario has accelerated the implementation of Best Start in the following three communities serving as models for communities across the province.

District of Timiskaming:

Families in this northeastern area of Ontario, with a large francophone community, face the challenges of finding child care services close to home and

schools. They must get back and forth between home, work, schools and child care centres over long distances.

Rural areas of Lambton and Kent:

Families in this part of southwestern Ontario drive long distances between home, work, schools and child care centres. By integrating local services and supports for children and families, implementing Best Start here will build a stronger community, and help more local children and parents get access to services and supports.

Hamilton's east end:

Many families and children in this urban area have long struggled to find quality child care and other parenting supports. Parents here need a variety of services at convenient hours, located close together, under one roof wherever possible.

All three communities have a solid network of community agencies that are well-placed for rapid implementation of the Best Start plan that includes:

- A rapid expansion of child care spaces for children in junior kindergarten and senior kindergarten
- A half-day learning program and child care spaces for two-and-a-half to four-year-olds
- Early and ongoing screening of newborns to identify needs and supports
- Early and ongoing identification of specialized hearing and language needs
- A comprehensive 18-month well-baby checkup.

Doing it right

Community planning

The Best Start plan is flexible and community-driven - developed by each community for that community - along the boundaries of service system managers, which administer child care in Ontario. To this end, all communities will have local Best Start networks, along with four regional French-language networks, to help plan and implement Best Start. The province will also work closely with community partners - school boards, educators, public health units, child care and children's services providers, municipalities and, most importantly, parents, who play a key role in preparing their children for school.

Easing cost pressures of municipalities

The cost of increasing the number of subsidies and child care spaces for children enrolled in junior and senior kindergarten and newborns to age four will not be a financial burden on municipalities. Even before the new federal funding arrangement was signed, Ontario had proposed relief from the municipal child care cost share provisions for 2005-06. Ontario is now extending this cost share relief with the new federal funds. Municipalities will not have to meet the

cost share provisions for the duration of the federal child care agreements. This move will save municipalities more than \$208 million over three years, beginning in 2005-06.

Putting capital funding in place

Initially, communities can use existing vacant child care spaces to accommodate children in the system, giving priority to children in junior and senior kindergarten and gradually expanding to accommodate newborns to age four. They are currently identifying the retrofits, renovations, capital improvements and/or new construction required to provide safe, high quality child care to accommodate additional spaces for 2005-06 and projects that can begin in 2005-06. Schools will be the first choice for the expansion of child care spaces.

Measuring results

Ontario is also taking steps to monitor how its investments in early development are helping children and their families. An assessment tool - the Early Development Instrument - is being implemented across the province at the community level to determine children's readiness to learn at school. The results will help communities to better plan and meet the needs of their children and families.



Next steps

Best Start is an ambitious long-term strategy. A number of early milestones include:

By 2005-06, Ontario's parents and families can expect:

- A detailed plan that outlines their community's vision for Best Start and how it will be implemented (due December 31, 2005)
- More access to child care spaces and subsidies, with priority for children in junior and senior kindergarten during non-school hours, and gradual expansion for newborns to age four
- An assessment tool that will help communities determine children's readiness to learn at school and help identify areas and neighbourhoods in high need of early child development support
- Recommendations from three expert panels: the 18-Month Well Baby Expert Panel will report in October 2005; the Expert Panel on Quality and Human Resources will report in fall 2006, and the Early Learning Program panel will report in December 2006
- Proposed legislation to form an Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators
- Enhancements to the early identification and intervention program, Healthy Babies Healthy Children, and to the Preschool Speech and Language and Infant Hearing programs.

By 2007-08, Ontario's parents and families can expect:

- Best Start fully operating in the three communities serving as models: Hamilton's east end, the rural areas of Lambton and Kent, and the District of Timiskaming
- Some Best Start components in all communities, including more child care, particularly for children in junior and senior kindergarten
- Approximately 25,000 more new licensed spaces by the end of 2007-08 for children in junior and senior kindergarten, and for children newborn to age four. As of March 31, 2004, Ontario had 124,442 licensed child spaces for children, newborn up to and including age five.
- Funds to support increases to the average wage of child care workers in the system.

Working with the federal government

Ontario signed a historic Agreement-in-Principle with the federal government, Moving Forward on Early Learning and Child Care, on May 6, 2005. This agreement was the result of the Government of Canada's February 2005 budget commitment to invest \$5 billion over five years to enhance and expand high-quality developmental early learning and child care in Canada.

Moving Forward on Early Learning and Child Care is founded on the same principles as Best Start - quality, universal inclusiveness, accessibility and development. These principles reflect values that Ontario shares with the federal government, child care workers and advocates, children's health professionals and parents across Canada.

Ontario's share of new federal funding for child care under this Agreement is approximately \$1.9 billion over five years, including \$271.9 million for this year.



Ontario's preliminary action plan for investing the new federal funds

Ontario plans to spend its share of the new federal funds on the expansion of quality child care component of Best Start. This includes funding from the new 2005 Ontario-Canada Early Learning and Child Care Agreement-in-Principle, as well as ongoing federal support from the earlier 2003 Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care.

This preliminary plan outlines where we will direct the new 2005 Ontario-Canada Early Learning and Child Care Agreement-in-Principle funds. We will work with municipalities over the coming months to develop more specific plans. Our final action plan will include more specific targets and next steps.

Ontario's priorities for investing the new federal funds are consistent with the principles of quality, universal inclusiveness, accessibility and development. These principles reflect values shared with the federal-provincial agreements and Best Start.

Universal inclusiveness

Ontario wants as many children to benefit from a quality early learning and child care system as possible, given available resources.

- We are taking steps to make access to assistance with the costs of child care easier. This includes moving from our current needs test for eligibility to a test based on income.
- In addition to this, Ontario will work in partnership with the municipalities to make sure the needs for francophones are addressed and that there is an increase in child care centres serving this population.
- As well, federal funds are being invested so we can better serve children with special needs in the early learning and care system.





Quality and Development

We know from research that children who experience high quality child care do better.

This is why, in addition to expanding the number of spaces in the early learning and child care system, Ontario is undertaking a number of initiatives to improve and support the healthy development of children within that system.

Ontario is directing the new federal funding to address three quality issues:

- What should children experience when they are in an early learning and child care setting? For example, what is the early learning program and how does it integrate with junior and senior kindergarten?
- What needs to be in place to support a quality interaction between adults and children in an early learning and child care setting? For example, what type of professional works in these settings? What are the wages and working conditions? How do we monitor quality?
- What are the professional standards that should be in place for early childhood educators?

We are addressing these quality issues through:

- The expert panels that will eventually guide Best Start implementation - the Expert Panel on an Early Learning Program, and the Expert Panel on Quality and Human Resources.
- The development and implementation of an early learning program across the province based on the recommendations of the panels.
- The proposed establishment of a new College of Early Childhood Educators, which will set the qualifications and standards for professionals who work in early learning and child care
- Providing funds to municipalities each year to support an increase to the average wages of child care workers in the regulated system.



Accessibility

A fundamental component of our Best Start plan is the expansion of the early learning and care system so that more families who choose to can find a space and more families who need assistance with the cost of child care receive it.

Access can also be affected by the location of services. For this reason, and to support a smooth transition to school for young children, Ontario wants to see the expansion of child care spaces occurring within elementary schools wherever possible. In addition, other key supports, such as parenting programs and access to specialized services, will be integrated and located with the early learning and child care programs wherever possible.

Ontario will invest the new federal funding to:

- Create new child care spaces each and every year, with priority for children enrolled in junior and senior kindergarten in English-language and French-language schools, and gradual expansion for newborns to four-year-olds
- Support more children, each and every year, to access the child care system
- Support the child care components of the three communities, where Best Start is being accelerated, to show how services that are integrated and situated in a familiar neighbourhood location can make things better for families.

The new Federal funding from the Agreement-in-Principle and the 2003 Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care, will build upon the approximately \$570 million that is already provided for child care in Ontario. Ontario municipalities used the 2003 funding agreement to support existing child care spaces, create an additional 4,000 subsidized child care spaces, increase access for preschool aged children and begin to lay the foundations for Best Start.

For further information

Further information on Ontario's Agreement-in-Principle with the federal government and Ontario's early learning and child care system can be found at www.children.gov.on.ca

The Children's Information Portal at www.childrensinfo.ca provides one-window access to information about provincially-funded services for children, youth and their families.

Ontario's Baseline Report on Early Learning and Child Care, at www.children.gov.on.ca provides more details on Ontario's child care system.



Ontario

Ministry of Children and Youth Services