

Ontario Best Start Action Plan – A Progress Report

Ontario's Best Start Plan

The Ontario government envisions an Ontario where:

All children and youth have the best opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential

In order to help make that vision a reality, the government introduced its Best Start Plan on November 25, 2004, a comprehensive and ambitious early learning and care strategy that requires the province and municipalities to work with parents, service providers, and different ministries to support healthy child development and early learning. A new five year federal funding commitment to early learning and child care will help Ontario meet the objectives of the Best Start Plan.

The goal of Best Start is that children in Ontario will be ready and eager to achieve success in school by the time they start Grade One. This is a strategy that is a partnership with parents –fundamentally supporting parents in their pivotal role of helping their children to be successful, regardless of their circumstances. Best Start places an emphasis on children, and their families, prenatal to age 6, and supports their transition into Grade One. It is the foundation upon which Ontario will develop future generations that will succeed. It is also the platform to address the broad determinants of healthy child development.

The Best Start plan is the largest investment in child care and early childhood development in the province's history and reflects a new commitment to Ontario's young people. For over a decade, the regulated child care system in Ontario has received minimal investments and as a result, has experienced very little growth, declining levels of quality and accessibility, and an overall reduced capacity to fully meet the early learning and child care needs of Ontario's children and families, including Francophone, Aboriginal and those children with linguistic, cultural or special needs. As a result, the system had a diminished ability to support children's healthy development and some of Ontario's children were not entering school ready to achieve success.

Ontario's Best Start vision evolved from the need to expand the **accessibility** and **quality** of early learning and child care, and to enhance the province's ability to meet **diverse needs** of its young children and their families. Fundamentally, Best Start is about supporting children in reaching their **developmental** milestones and smoothing their transition to Grade One, by helping to make sure

that they are ready and eager to achieve success in school. This is consistent with the QUAD principles.

Best Start is a transformative and ambitious strategy, grounded in the principles of quality, universally inclusive, accessible and developmental early learning and child care, that will take over ten years to fully implement. By using an integrated approach to the provision of service at the community level, Best Start will help create a comprehensive system of services that supports children, including Francophone, Aboriginal, and children with linguistic, cultural and special needs, from birth through to the transition into school.

Best Start – A Community-driven and Responsive Early Learning and Care Strategy

Ontario's Best Start Plan is a community-driven and responsive approach to transforming and enhancing the early learning and care system.

From development through to implementation, Ontario has engaged in extensive consultation and dialogue with its diverse communities and stakeholders. At its core, Best Start is a partnership with parents and recognizes the important role parents play in meeting the early development needs of their children. In addition to parents, Ontario's extensive engagement with stakeholders has included child care and children's services providers, programs/services targeted towards children with special needs, population-specific services, including those targeted towards Francophone, Aboriginal and other specific cultural groups, policy makers and funders, health and specialized services and community service providers.

Best Start is also a partnership with municipalities. As the local child care service system managers, municipalities are leading the community planning process and helping to make sure that Best Start community plans are consistent with the QUAD principles, adhere to the Best Start vision, and are tailored to meet the unique needs of Ontario's diverse communities. Municipalities are currently engaged in the multi-year planning for Best Start. These plans are to be completed by the end of January 2006. Ontario's achievements will be based on the plans developed through this community-driven process.

In planning for Best Start, and to guide the province-wide rollout, Ontario has engaged stakeholders and communities in a number of different ways, including:

- Developing an integrated and community-driven Best Start planning process through the establishment of 47 community-based Best Start networks responsible for planning and implementing Best Start at the local level and in a manner that reflects the unique needs of each community.

- Establishing 4 Regional French-language Best Start networks, comprised of French-language stakeholders, to respond to the needs of French-language communities across Ontario.
- Developing an Aboriginal engagement strategy through collaboration with Aboriginal stakeholders so as to meet the unique needs of Ontario's Aboriginal children and families.
- Implementing a *Schools First* policy which states that schools will be the first choice for the expansion of child care spaces and for the location of the neighbourhood early learning and care hubs. The involvement and participation of School Boards in the Best Start planning process is integral to meeting the goals of Best Start and supporting children as they transition into Grade 1.
- Undertaking consultations in Winter 2005 at the provincial and regional level with over 1,800 stakeholders across the province in order to seek input on the Best Start Implementation Planning Guidelines. Subsequent to this consultation, the Best Start Guidelines were finalized to incorporate the feedback received.
- Key Best Start initiatives, including the proposed College of Early Childhood Educators, the Income Test model, Best Start Expert Panels, Child Care Funding Review, etc., involve the direct participation of key stakeholders who advise and guide the rollout of the Best Start Plan.

This extensive community involvement has enabled Ontario to plan and implement Best Start in a manner that is responsive and reflective of the unique needs and circumstances across Ontario's diverse communities. This community-driven process will also allow Best Start to evolve in response to the changing needs of Ontario's diverse communities throughout the ten-year Best Start vision.

Moving Forward with Best Start: Significant Progress to Date

Since the government of Ontario announced its Best Start Plan in November 2004, significant progress has been made towards achieving the goals of Phase One of Best Start, as reflected in the attached chart outlining Best Start milestones and objectives. A new five-year federal funding commitment to early learning and child care means that Ontario will continue to build on these achievements.

Some highlights of Best Start accomplishment to date include:

- Launch of a comprehensive community planning process in July 2005, in which municipalities received their allocations from the first year of the federal funding established for early learning and child care.
- To support future planning in 2006/07 and 2007/08 municipalities were also provided with planning allocations for the province-wide creation of approximately 25,000 new licensed spaces by 2007/08.
- Communities also received tools to support the planning and implementation of Best Start, including the Implementation Planning Guidelines for Best Start Networks, Requirements for Developing Best Start Infrastructure Projects for CMSMs/DSSABs, Ontario Planning and Design Guidelines for Child Care Centres, and the Ontario Child Care Service Management Requirements.
- Using the first year of federal funding, municipalities have reported the creation of over 5,000 new licensed child care spaces since April 2005, with municipal projections of approximately 12,500 spaces by the end of 2005/06. This is in addition to the over 4,000 subsidized spaces that were created in 2004/05.
- Ontario has listened to municipalities' concerns over their ability to meet their cost-sharing obligations on this major child care expansion. For the duration of the new federal funding, Ontario will ease municipal cost pressures by providing the funds at 100 percent. Removal of this cost-sharing obligation will save municipalities approximately \$208 million over the next three years, and approximately \$46 million in 2005/06.
- Best Start external advisory panels that will provide expert advice and recommendations on:
 - Developing strategies for a province-wide developmental assessment at 18 months of age – recommendations delivered in October 2005
 - Developing a learning framework for preschool children, including those with cultural, linguistic and special needs, that can link to Junior and Senior Kindergarten programs (JK/SK), and ultimately become a single, integrated learning framework for children in preschool and JK/SK
 - Looking at recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood education practitioners and ways to improve quality in the regulated sector
- Establishment of three demonstration communities – rural areas of Lambton and Chatham-Kent, the District of Timiskaming, and Hamilton's

east end - to implement the full Best Start vision, at an accelerated pace in order to identify best practices and guide the province-wide implementation of Best Start. This will include the implementation of neighbourhood early learning and care hubs, which will offer a single, integrated, seamless point of access to services and supports based on local needs and available resources. The demonstration communities will show how services that are integrated and situated in a familiar neighbourhood location can strengthen quality and access and contribute to positive outcomes for families. By 2007/08 the three demonstration communities have collectively committed to implementing over 50 early learning and care hubs, and to expanding the number of licensed child care spaces by approximately 3,500.

ACTION PLAN PROGRESS REPORT – MILESTONES/OBJECTIVES

Milestones/Objectives	Quad Principle Supported																																	
	Q	U	A	D																														
Increasing the Accessibility and Affordability of Ontario's Early Learning and Child Care System																																		
Expansion of spaces <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ontario has committed to expanding the child care system by approximately 25,000 spaces by the end of 2007/08, based on community need and community plans • In the October 2005 Best Start Community Plans, municipalities have identified that they will expand by over 12,500 spaces by the end of 2005/06 using the first year of federal funds • The majority, approximately 8,550 new spaces, will be allocated by municipalities to JK/SK children, and approximately 3,950 for children 0-4 		✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓																															
Income Test Model <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support more children, each and every year, with access to the child care system • Development of an income test model and working with select communities to assess the potential impact of the model • Province-wide implementation of the income test formula in 2006 		✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓																															
Demonstration Communities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the child care component of the three demonstration communities, where Best Start is being accelerated, to show how services that are integrated and situated in a familiar neighbourhood location can improve access and outcomes for children and families. <p>Child Care Spaces in Demonstration Communities by 2007/08</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: left;">Demonstration Community</th> <th style="text-align: left;">Total New Spaces by 2007/08</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Lambton and Chatham-Kent</td> <td>858</td> </tr> <tr> <td>District of Timiskaming</td> <td>940</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Hamilton</td> <td>1751</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Total</td> <td>3,549</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Neighbourhood Early Learning and Care Hubs by 2007/08</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: left;">Demonstration Community</th> <th style="text-align: left;">hubs</th> <th style="text-align: left;">Hubs in schools</th> <th style="text-align: left;">Hubs in non-school locations</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Lambton and Chatham-Kent</td> <td>21</td> <td>20</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>District of Timiskaming</td> <td>23</td> <td>21</td> <td>2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Hamilton</td> <td>7</td> <td>5</td> <td>2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>TOTAL</td> <td>51</td> <td>46</td> <td>5</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Demonstration Community	Total New Spaces by 2007/08	Lambton and Chatham-Kent	858	District of Timiskaming	940	Hamilton	1751	Total	3,549	Demonstration Community	hubs	Hubs in schools	Hubs in non-school locations	Lambton and Chatham-Kent	21	20	1	District of Timiskaming	23	21	2	Hamilton	7	5	2	TOTAL	51	46	5	✓	✓	✓	✓
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct an evaluation of demonstration communities – an evaluation framework has been developed to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation, service delivery and impact of Best Start. The evaluation results will be used to facilitate and refine the subsequent implementation of the full Best Start Plan across the province 	✓	✓	✓	✓
<p>Undertake a review of how child care operators are funded</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> With a view to increasing accessibility and improving quality in the child care system, Ontario is undertaking a review of the current practices of funding child care operators to be completed in 2006 	✓		✓	
<p>Ease Cost Pressures on Municipalities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Removal of municipal cost-sharing on the new child care funding beginning in 2005/06 through 2009/10. This will save municipalities approximately \$208 M over the next three years, starting with approximately \$46 million in 2005/06 		✓	✓	
<p>Access to Best Start Information for Parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Ministry of Children and Youth Services' website has been enhanced to improve the information available to families and providers on a range of issues pertaining to Best Start. Information will also be available in Ontario Early Years Centres 	✓	✓	✓	
Strengthening the Quality of Ontario's Early Learning and Child Care System				
<p>Wage Improvements in the Regulated Sector</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To support expansion of Ontario's licensed child care system, and to attract and retain skilled early childhood education professionals, a number of municipalities have earmarked funds for specifically for wage improvements for child care workers. Ontario is estimating an expenditure of approximately \$34.0 M in 2006/07 and \$57.2 M in 2007/08 towards wage improvements for eligible child care staff in the regulated sector. 	✓		✓	✓
<p>College of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proposing to establish a College of ECEs, which would set qualifications and standards, consistent with QUAD, for professionals working in early learning and child care College of ECEs model is under development. If passed, legislation would allow for the appointment of a Transition Council in 2006/07, and a permanent College of ECEs to be appointed in 2007/08 	✓			✓
<p>Best Start Expert Panels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Quality and Human Resources</u> – developing recommendations, consistent with QUAD, to strengthen the quality of the early learning and care system through consideration of issues such as recruitment, retention and remuneration of early 	✓		✓	

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Milestones/Objectives	Quad Principle Supported			
	Q	U	A	D
<p>childhood education practitioners; recommendations due September 2006</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Early Learning Framework</u> - developing: (i) learning framework for preschool children, consistent with QUAD – April 2006, and (ii) single, integrated, learning framework for children preschool through Kindergarten, including children with cultural, linguistic and special needs – December 2006 • <u>18 Month Well Baby Visit</u> - in October 2005, delivered its recommendations regarding strategies for a standardized developmental assessment at 18 months of age for all children in Ontario 	✓	✓	✓	✓
<p>Schools First Policy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To support children's transition into Grade 1, Ontario has developed a <i>Schools First</i> policy prioritizing schools as the first choice for expansion of child care spaces, thereby strengthening the link between early learning, child care and education 	✓	✓	✓	✓
<p>Development of a Provincial Baseline of Children's Readiness to Learn</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the <i>Early Development Instrument</i> (EDI), a population-based tool designed to measure the outcomes of children's early years, Ontario will establish a provincial baseline of children's readiness to learn • Data collection for the EDI will be completed in 2005/06; a full provincial baseline for EDI will be available in Fall 2006 	✓			✓
<p>Review of Child Care Legislation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertaking a review of the <i>Day Nurseries Act</i> to eliminate barriers to creating integrated early learning and care settings, for implementation in 2006 	✓	✓	✓	✓
Developing an Inclusive Early Learning and Child Care System				
<p>Community Planning Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 47 Best Start networks established in Sept. 2005 composed of key community stakeholders that reflect the unique composition of each community, including communities with cultural, linguistic or other unique needs. The Best Start networks are responsible for the planning and implementation of Best Start at the local level and making sure that the implementation of Best Start remains responsive to the community's needs • Provide communities with tools to support planning including Implementation Planning Guidelines for Best Start Networks, Requirements for Developing Best Start Infrastructure Projects for CMSMs/DSSABs and Ontario Planning and Design Guidelines for Child Care Centres 	✓	✓	✓	
	✓	✓	✓	

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<p>Francophone Best Start Strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of 4 Regional French-Language Best Start networks to respond to the needs of French-language communities, and to facilitate the participation of French-language District School Boards and other Francophone stakeholders in the Best Start planning process. • Developing a Provincial French-language Workgroup to advise and problem solve in collaboration with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) as Best Start rolls out in Francophone communities across Ontario • Best Start Demonstration Communities are planning for the creation of French-language neighbourhood early learning and care hubs • Distribution of spaces in French Language School Boards – Best Start Community Plans have indicated a trend in that the proportion of spaces for the French-language communities is reflective of the percentage of French-language board students among Ontario schools 	✓	✓	✓	✓
<p>Aboriginal Best Start Strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a Best Start Aboriginal Engagement Strategy in order to meet the unique needs of Ontario's Aboriginal children and families • Best Start Demonstration Communities are planning for the creation of Aboriginal-specific neighbourhood early learning and care hubs 	✓	✓	✓	✓
<p>Children with special needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of 47 Best Start networks province-wide including representation from programs/services targeted towards children with special needs so as to support the inclusion of children with special needs at each stage of Best Start planning and implementation • Funding invested into supporting children with special needs with equal access to the early learning and care system. Best Start Community Plans indicate that Special Needs Resourcing will support a number of activities, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Creation of more spaces that are compliant with the <i>Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2001</i> ○ Hiring additional staff at centres ○ Providing staff with specialized training ○ Hiring specialized staff to travel to support several centres ○ Using a regional intake model that places children with special needs in the facility best equipped to meet those needs 	✓	✓	✓	✓

Prior to April 2007, more specific objectives and targets will be developed for the last years (until the end of March 2010) of the federal funding commitment. This process will involve input from Ontario's municipalities, early learning and child care stakeholders and the community.