

**In the Best Interests of Children and Families:
A Discussion of Early Childhood Education and Care
in Alberta**

A Synthesis of Regional Discussions



The Muttart Foundation

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1. Introduction

In fall 2010, the Muttart Foundation released a discussion paper on the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care in the province of Alberta (*In the Best Interests of Children and Families: A Discussion of Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta*). The paper was developed to stimulate discussion on how Alberta might best approach the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care for its youngest citizens and their families.

Following the release of the paper, the Foundation, with the support of local partners, hosted five regional forums across the province. The forums provided an opportunity for a broad array of early childhood education and care stakeholders to come together to consider the ideas presented in the paper and to share their own insights and perspectives on the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care. A follow-up sixth forum was held in Calgary with senior staff, most of whom were early childhood educators.

The current report summarizes the key themes that emerged from these discussions and provides a synthesis of participants' thoughts and responses to the discussion paper. It concludes with an initial framing of some of the key issues or questions that early childhood education and care stakeholders will need to consider as they work together to advance change in the funding and delivery early childhood education and care.

As with the initial discussion paper, this summary report is most useful as a vehicle for stimulating further discussion. In this light, the report will serve as a background document for a final provincial meeting of early childhood education stakeholders scheduled for October 2011, in Edmonton. This final meeting, sponsored by the Muttart Foundation and Success by 6, will bring together a cross-section of participants from the regional forums both to reflect on the initial forum discussions, and to begin the process of considering the key actions or strategies required to advance the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care.

2. The Regional ECEC Forum Process

The Foundation, with the support of local partners, hosted five regional forums:

- Edmonton and Area – December 3, 2010
- Grande Prairie (and Northwest Region) – March 11, 2011
- Red Deer (and Central Region) – April 15, 2011
- Calgary and Area – May 2, 2011
- Lethbridge (and Southeast/Southwest regions) – May 6, 2011

A sixth forum was held in Calgary at the beginning of June with participants drawn primarily from early learning and care organizations. Mount Royal University and the Alberta Child Care Association arranged and hosted this forum.

The forums followed a similar format. Participants were invited to attend given their knowledge and expertise in the area of early learning and care or more broadly that of early childhood development. They were not asked to represent their organizations, but rather to contribute to the discussions as individuals with key insights on the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care.

One hundred and eighty-six participants attended the five regional forums. Their primary areas of work are as follows:

- sixty-three are senior staff from either a community organization or private business involved in the delivery of services to children and families;
- forty participants work in government (provincial, municipal or federal) or for Alberta Health Services or regional Child and Family Service Authorities;
- twenty-five are researchers or instructors at the post-secondary level;
- twenty-four are affiliated with a school board (either in an administrative or teaching capacity);

- twenty-one are affiliated with infrastructure organizations supporting early childhood education and care;
- eleven are senior staff from community funding bodies including the United Way; and
- two are from the business community.

A further twenty-four senior staff from the early childhood education and care sector attended the sixth forum in Calgary.

Participants received the discussion paper in advance of the session and were asked to consider the arguments and ideas it presents prior to their attendance. The forums included presentations on the content of the report followed by facilitated discussions to explore participants' thoughts on and responses to the arguments presented.

The discussions were not intended to arrive at consensus, but rather to support the exchange of different thoughts and ideas. The Foundation prepared summary reports after each of the forums which captured the participants' comments and grouped them according to major themes. The participants received copies of these reports as a record of the forum discussions.

3. A Summary of the Forum Discussions

3.1 Introduction

The initial discussions within each forum explored the participants' responses to the background sections of the *'In the Best Interests of Children and Families'* report. A second series of discussions explored the main ideas presented in the final section of the paper which outlines an alternate approach to the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care. In the final discussions, participants in the Edmonton forum considered the merits of different change strategies, while those in Red Deer, Lethbridge, Grande Prairie and Calgary considered the implications of change at the provincial, regional, community and organizational levels.

The following sections summarize the major discussion themes.

3.2 Discussions of the Background Sections of Paper

Participants, using modified scales, rated the descriptions provided in the background sections of the discussion paper as accurate (94 percent of respondents). A small number of participants observed some inaccuracies (3 percent), while a similar number (3 percent) were not sure. Participants at the Lethbridge regional forum were the most likely to observe inaccuracies highlighting a better balance between the demand and supply of services in their region as well as the importance of parents as the primary supporters of early learning. The early childhood educators at the sixth forum also described the background sections of the report as accurate.

In their subsequent discussions of what they would add to or change in the descriptions provided, and the identification of any new questions that emerge, participants noted the need for fuller discussions of the roles of parents and families in supporting early learning and care; the value of considering early learning and care as part of a broader discussion of early childhood development; and the need for additional information on the experiences of First Nations, Metis and new immigrant parents and families.

Participants also commented on the lack of research on how, or why, families choose unregulated care – and the nature and quality of these care experiences. They expressed an

interest in better understanding the experiences of families in different regions of the province and how these differ, significantly or not, between rural and urban communities. Participants also requested more information on the level and nature of political and public support for additional public investments in early childhood education and care. They further suggested that many parents and families are still not well-informed on the benefits of high quality early childhood education and care.

3.3 Discussions of an Alternate Approach to Early Childhood Education and Care

Participant discussions of an alternate approach to the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care considered four dimensions of the proposed new model:

- Expanding the quantity of services to form a continuum of early learning and care;
- Increasing the quality of services provided;
- The financing of early childhood education and care; and
- System planning and management

They reached broad agreement on the overall value of an alternate approach while presenting some differing views on how to improve families' access to high quality early childhood education and care. For ease of presentation, the participant discussions of these four dimensions of service are considered separately below, although there are understandably links between them.

3.3.1 The Expansion of Services – Increasing the Quantity

Across the forums, participants highlighted the need to consider a range of stakeholder opinions – including those of parents and service providers - on how best to expand the delivery of services. They emphasized the value of thinking about the expansion of programs and services within the broader context of supports for early childhood development and advised that partnerships with families and communities remain central to any proposed changes.

Participants commented on the challenges of expanding services too quickly, given the limited capacity in place to support significant change, and noted the importance of maintaining the

quality of services during any expansion. They indicated support for expanded services that provide all families with choices (including parents who stay at home with young children), and advised of the need to accommodate the increasing diversity of families while also ensuring that the cost of service does not present a barrier for families.

Participants saw value in new partnerships between schools, municipalities and community service providers (business and non-profit) to support the expansion of services, but saw some challenges in developing these given differing interests, differences in access to resources and infrastructure, and different perspectives on the goals and purpose of early childhood education and care. They saw the resolution of these differences as requiring compromise from all parties.

In this spirit, participants offered their overall support for the expansion of junior kindergarten and kindergarten program for all children with parents free to choose whether or not their children attend. They cautioned, however, on the need to consider the impact of expanding these programs on existing community services. Participants advised of the importance of ensuring that staff with an early childhood education deliver these services and that the services themselves use developmentally appropriate approaches and practices to support early learning.

Participants voiced their support for government ministries to work more collaboratively in support of early childhood education and care, and saw significant value in formal partnerships at the ministerial level (Education, Children and Youth Services and Health and Wellness). They advised that any new public funding for service expansion must be sustained and may need to target priority areas first (such as services in rural communities or infant care).

Participants saw the need to ‘sell’ the idea of a more comprehensive approach to the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care to the broader public and to ensure strong political support for additional public investments. They saw value in learning from Alberta’s previous experiences in considering and implementing system change, and highlighted the need to ensure that any new approaches to service delivery reflect the Alberta context.

3.3.2 Strengthening Services – Increasing the Quality

As in the discussions of service expansion, participants noted the importance of ensuring that high quality services and supports are accessible to all families, including those who support their child’s development in home settings. They emphasized the importance of uniformly applied, high standards and noted the current challenges that service providers face in delivering high quality services.

Participants advised that significant new public investments are required to increase the quality of service and commented on the need for political support to ensure that these resources are available, particularly in smaller communities and for populations not well-served by current services. They further identified the need to increase both parents’ and the public’s understandings of why quality is important and what it looks like in service settings.

Participants agreed on the need to elevate standards within the early childhood education and care field through higher levels of formal education and ongoing professional development. They saw the introduction of a College of Early Childhood Educators as one vehicle to achieve this goal. Participants acknowledged the need to increase the remuneration for early childhood educators if the field is to be viewed as a profession with accompanying career opportunities. They also cautioned around the potential impact of higher education and training standards on current staff – many of whom are new immigrant women – and advised that many staff will face challenges in meeting higher standards. Participants commented on the importance of all staff in early learning settings, including schools, completing formal early childhood education.

The majority of participants saw the development of a curriculum framework for early childhood education and care as positive; although a minority expressed some concerns around the broad notion of a curriculum. Those in favour of a curriculum framework advised of the need for developmentally appropriate learning strategies and goals, as well as a sensitivity to the diverse cultural needs of children and their families.

Participants commented, again, on the need for greater collaboration between the ministries of Education and Children and Youth Services to support higher quality services with Alberta

Health and Wellness also included in future collaborations. At the community level, participants saw the opportunity for partnerships between schools and community organizations to improve service quality.

Similarly, participants saw an opportunity to further develop the infrastructure organizations that support service quality (for example, the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement and the Alberta Association for the Accreditation of Early Learning and Care Services). They advised that these organizations must be appropriately resourced to undertake this work.

Participants identified the need for clear timelines and strategies to increase service quality, and the development of standards that apply to all regulated service providers. They advised that service providers would require support to reach these higher standards, and commented that not all current service providers appear well-informed on key aspects of service quality.

3.3.3 Financing Early Childhood Education and Care

Participants commented on the need to highlight the value of public investment in early childhood education and care with a range of audiences including political leaders, the business community and the broader public. They agreed on the necessity of provincial political support before any significant new investments could take place, and opined that arguments that focus on the educational or economic value of early learning and care may position the field more favourably for these investments. Participants acknowledged the challenges of calling for increased public investments in the current fiscal climate, and suggested that more information on how other jurisdictions fund early childhood education and care may help to strengthen the arguments for change.

Participants reiterated the challenges that service providers face in delivering high quality services within the current financing model, and the related challenges that families face in accessing services that are affordable. They saw higher levels of public investment, delivered through supply-side funding strategies, as the most effective way to increase families' access to affordable, high quality early childhood education and care.

Participants commented that the cost of care should not present a barrier to families accessing service. A minority expressed the view that early childhood education and care should be available to all families at little or no private cost, similar to public education. Participants also considered future roles for private businesses in covering their employees' early learning and child care costs and in providing in-kind support for service delivery. They also considered additional future roles for private philanthropy in supporting service delivery.

As in the discussions of service quantity and quality, participants emphasized that new public monies support family choices in early childhood education and care, with further new investments also needed in family and parenting supports. They noted the value of arguments for investments in broader provincial family policies that can be seen to benefit all families with young children.

Participants emphasized the need for new public investments to support services that are inclusive and of a high quality. They also saw merit in targeting new public monies to families and communities that are currently poorly served. Participants acknowledged the need for higher levels of organizational accountability and reporting in support of increased public investment, and considered how different service providers would respond to these requirements.

They emphasized the need to ensure that new public investments for services for children four and five years of age not take place at the expense of services for younger children. And that the potential impacts of increased public investments in junior kindergarten and kindergarten on community-based services be considered – and where possible minimized.

Participants highlighted the need for all government ministries with an interest in early childhood education and care to work more closely together to better integrate the financing of service delivery. They commented on the current funding 'silos' and the negative impact that these can have on service delivery at the community level. Some participants favoured the consolidation of existing funding streams under a single ministry (perhaps Education or a new Ministry for Early Childhood Development) with an associated shift to a public funding model similar to that in place for education. Other participants cautioned of the challenges involved in this

consolidation, and expressed a preference for the existing ministries to work more closely together to reduce funding inequities and close funding gaps.

Participants identified the need for a comprehensive, long-term strategy for change that includes sufficient resources to cover transition costs, as well operational funding for service delivery (including capital costs). They saw value in local municipalities playing a greater role in supporting early childhood education and care, and the benefits of making better use of school facilities for family supports and services outside of regular school hours. Participants emphasized the need to invest in improved salaries and benefits for early childhood educators.

Finally, participants at the Edmonton forum highlighted the need to develop a better public understanding of how best to finance early childhood education and care. They saw the need for arguments that call for a funding model similar to that in place for public education.

3.3.4 System Planning and Management

Participants commented on the importance of a broad vision (or framework) for the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care. They identified the need for government ministries to work together in support of this vision with agreed purposes and common goals. Participants concurred that while the ministries of Education and Children and Youth Services have key roles to play in supporting this vision, other ministries should also be involved such as Health and Wellness. As an alternate to the above ministries working more closely together, participants also saw merit in the formation of a new ministry with a focus on early childhood development.

Participants commented on the need to engage a broad range of stakeholders in developing a provincial framework for early childhood education and care – including First Nations and Metis communities, service providers and the business community. They emphasized the need to connect with parents and families – and to take into account the needs of all families.

Participants advised that a new system design should not come from the ‘top down’ but must also include ‘bottom up’ community voices. They suggested that learnings from other system

change efforts might inform the current work, as would the experiences of other jurisdictions that have undertaken similar changes in early childhood education and care.

Participants offered their support for a continuum of services that addresses all aspects of early childhood development – including early childhood education and care. They also remarked that services must be available and accessible to all families – and not just targeted. Participants further noted that the impact of changes in one service or program on other programs must be considered and saw merit in building on the current services and supports in place. They advised that any new system must have a strong basis in the local communities it serves.

Participants noted the importance of clear timelines for system change – with a need to manage the change process in an environment of fiscal restraint. They agreed that change should take place over a longer term period, that clear strategies were required to effect change, and that a strong commitment to the change process was required.

Participants commented on the importance of regional management and service delivery that remains responsive to local needs. They saw expanded roles for municipalities (with some cautions expressed), but raised some concerns around the capacity of Child and Family Service Authorities to take on larger planning and management roles. They saw some level of local decision making in service planning as important and highlighted the value of school systems and community organizations working together in support of local service delivery.

Participants advised that any new system must not create operational barriers – and must not generate more ‘red tape’ for service providers. They saw some risk for current service providers to be ‘squeezed out’ in a larger system, and advised of the need to ensure that any new service models can be effectively supported in smaller community settings. Participants cautioned of the need to consider how the transition from the current model of system planning and management to a new approach would take place.

Participants highlighted the importance of leadership at all levels in moving change forward, and cautioned of past change efforts that have either stalled or failed to deliver. They advised of the

need to balance the respective interests of the education and community-based stakeholders, while recognizing their different cultures and approaches to service delivery. They advised that, in some communities, school boards and community organizations may face challenges in working more closely together.

Participants saw the existing early childhood education infrastructure organizations and the post-secondary institutions as playing key roles in bringing stakeholders together to support change. They affirmed that all of the existing stakeholders with a direct interest in early childhood education and care have to assume some responsibility for designing and implementing change.

3.4 Strategies for Change and the Implications of Change

3.4.1 Strategies for Change

The Edmonton participants considered three change strategies drawn from the work of the Aspen Institute: comprehensive from the outset; organization around drivers for change; and opportunistic incrementalism. Participants saw merit in a comprehensive change strategy given the nature and scope of the work required to effect change. They identified the need for significant political leadership to advance such a strategy, and noted the challenges of getting broad stakeholder agreement on a common future vision for early childhood education and care.

Participants saw merit in organizing around specific ‘drivers’ for change. They considered this approach as more politically acceptable and to have the potential to engage a broad array of stakeholders in the process of change. Participants noted some danger of this approach perhaps leading to only incremental changes, and raised concerns about the specific ‘drivers’ that could be used to support significant change.

Participants saw an incrementalist approach as the least preferred strategy given the challenges of supporting change over a long time period through small steps. They suggested that previous attempts at incremental change had largely failed to deliver significant outcomes.

3.4.2 The Implications of Change

Participants at the Calgary, Red Deer, Grande Prairie and Lethbridge forums identified the following implications of change at the provincial, regional, community and organizational levels.

Provincial Level

Participants suggested that a more systematic approach to the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care could lead to common goals for children, more service consistency, the reduction of service barriers, and the better use of public resources. They argued that it may also lead to a higher profile for early childhood education and care. Participants advised that a significant ‘social marketing’ effort was required to ‘sell’ this new approach, and noted the challenges of implementing significant change in such a complex field. They affirmed the need for a well-considered long term strategy for change.

Participants raised questions around the level of political support for significant change – and where additional public dollars would come from. They advised that a more systematic approach would challenge some stakeholders.

Regional Level

Participants saw the potential for greater collaboration at the regional level and a more consistent quality of services with common regulations and guidelines. They saw the potential for the quantity and quality of services to improve, particularly for families in rural areas and those families not well-served within the current system.

Participants advised of the need to both gather stakeholder input on any proposed changes and to help organizations and communities transition to a new service model. They expressed some concerns that smaller voices may be lost in a larger system and that a focus on early childhood education may take precedence over community and family supports.

Community Level

Participants identified similar strengths and challenges to those at the regional level. They saw publicly funded services as more attractive to parents and acknowledged the competition that these services may present to current service providers.

Participants identified the need for local schools and municipalities to come on board early in supporting change, but expressed concerns that some may be unwilling to assume greater roles. They saw the potential for increased cooperation, a greater integration of services and an increase in the local infrastructure for early childhood education and care.

Organizational Level

Participants advised that most service providers lack the capacity to expand their services and cautioned around the probable shift of children from community-based services to new junior kindergarten and full-day kindergarten programs. While they saw some potential to increase the quantity and quality of services available, and to reach populations that are not well-served by the existing services, they advised of the need for new investments to do this.

Some participants saw practical challenges in expanding services, especially in rural communities, given the difficulties of attracting qualified staff and of securing space to deliver services. Participants raised questions around how larger numbers of staff could be educated to a higher level and how an appropriate early learning curriculum could be developed and put in place. They advised that early childhood educators should be given the opportunity to increase their education and training with the support of dedicated public resources.

Participants saw the potential for a more systematic approach both to increase public awareness of the importance of early childhood education and care and to help develop better linkages between existing service providers.

4. Key Issues or Questions Around a New Approach to the Funding and Delivery of Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta

The regional forums provided an invited group of stakeholders with the opportunity to consider the arguments and ideas presented in the discussion paper *'In the Best Interests of Children and Families'*. As summarized, the forum discussions revealed general agreement on the current nature and state of early childhood education and care in the province and a broad consensus on the need for significant change if the goal is to provide all families with affordable access to high quality early childhood education and care.

In their discussions, the forum participants spoke to many of the key issues or questions that will require consideration if Alberta is indeed to advance significant change in how it supports early childhood education and care for its youngest citizens and their families. This final section provides an overview of these issues or questions.

4.1 The Political Context for Early Childhood Education and Care

Participants expressed the need for a sound understanding of the political context in which discussions of changes in the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care will take place. Almost inevitably, the discussion of early childhood education and care is infused with differing personal opinions on the role of families, the boundaries between public and private responsibilities in the raising of young children, and even on how children themselves are viewed as our youngest citizens. These often strongly held views can lead political leaders to act cautiously in respect to public policy given the likelihood of some measure of opposition no matter the policy direction.

Researchers commenting on the common policy approaches to early childhood education and care distinguish between those informed by more neo-liberal views that emphasize the benefits of individual choice and private action and those which support a greater collective responsibility with a focus on publicly supported services. For the most part, Canadian early childhood education and care policy is guided more by the former than the latter; although a growing

number of provinces now place a greater emphasis on the collective responsibility for supporting early learning and care.

Traditionally, Alberta has favoured public policy approaches that are more neo-liberal in nature – with an emphasis on individual choice and private responsibility. This emphasis extends to the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care and is also seen to align with Albertan’s own values around families and support for child development; although these alignments are largely assumed rather than proven through research.

The recent political emphasis on the need for fiscal restraint, and the attendant calls to limit or reduce provincial spending, further complicates the discussion of increased public investments in almost all areas of service, with the possible exception of health. In this context, calls for greater public funding for early childhood education and care must take into account the political challenge of making significant new expenditures in both the short and perhaps medium terms.

Despite some research that indicates Albertan’s support for additional public investments in early childhood education and care, there is much that remains unclear about the strength and nature of this support, including how it compares to support for increased investments in other service areas. Public knowledge of the current funding and delivery of services appears also limited (which is perhaps not surprising), and there is some tendency for increased investments in early childhood education and care to be seen as taking place at the expense of other supports for parents and families. In these arguments, the interests of families who access regulated early learning and care are seen to compete against those families who do not in a contest over scarce resources. It may also represent a deeper disagreement on the appropriate allocation of private and public resources for supporting families and the raising of young children.

In summary, the province’s political traditions in public policy, the projected costs of significant changes in service delivery and the potential for differences of public opinion make the discussion of early childhood education and care a politically challenging one. That said, the prospect of new government leadership, allied with the work of key government ministries, notably Education and Health and Wellness, in raising the profile of early childhood development and in considering changes in the delivery services, suggest some potential

opportunities for advancing strategic change. The recent progress that other provinces have made in redesigning their services has perhaps also increased the pressure on Alberta to reconsider its support for early learning and care and helped to raise some stakeholder awareness of alternate service options.

4.2 The Purpose or Goals for Early Childhood Education and Care

During the forums, participants presented some differing views on the purpose or goals for early childhood education and care. These were perhaps most keenly expressed in terms of perceived tensions between a more narrow focus on early education as preparation for schooling and a broader focus on support for child development and family well-being.

The common arguments in support of public investments in early childhood education and care suggest four main purposes that high quality programs and services serve: to support early learning and child development; to enable the labour force participation of parents with young children; to support the social and cultural integration of families and communities; and to help address the inequities in opportunity that women and children face. The relative emphasis on each of these appears to evolve over time, and to differ across jurisdictions

In Alberta, as in much of Canada, much of the public investment in services for preschool age children, funded through the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, appears driven by concerns around the labour force participation of their parents - although the focus on supporting child development appears to be growing in importance. By contrast, half-day kindergarten and Early Childhood Services initiatives, funded through Alberta Education, retain a stronger early learning or child development focus, with publicly funded half-day kindergarten perhaps the most expansive in terms of its goals and purpose.

Striking a balance between the different goals for early childhood education and care remains challenging and can be shaped, in practice, by how services are funded and delivered. As participants commented throughout the forum discussions, the current funding and delivery of early childhood education and care, particularly for younger children, makes it difficult for service providers both to support parents' participation in the workforce and to foster early

childhood development; with the broader goals of social integration and of addressing issues of equity even more challenging to accommodate.

Across the forums, the majority of participants spoke of early education and care as a public good with broader public benefits similar, in some ways, to that of education. A minority, however, saw it more narrowly in terms of either a support for parents to participate in the labour market or as a program that can help prepare young children for formal education. These differences suggest the need for further discussions to clarify the key areas of consensus, as well as those of departure.

At minimum, stakeholders will need to reach agreement on the main purposes of early childhood education and care. They will further need to determine whether or not these purposes mean that it is most usefully thought of as a public good - with attendant public benefits that extend from early childhood development, parental support, social integration through to equity and social justice - or whether it is more a more discretionary service for which parents and families should retain the primary responsibility. The resolution of these discussions will likely involve some compromise and may involve thinking about differences in goals and purpose for children of different ages, and perhaps even for families with differing economic and social needs and resources.

4.3 Financing Early Childhood Education and Care

Participants described the financing discussions as amongst the most challenging in which to engage. While they reported a reasonable knowledge of the financial challenges facing organizations at the program level, they acknowledged a more limited understanding of the financing, and alternate financing options available, for early childhood education and care at the system level. Participants indicated the need for more information on financing models as well as comparisons of the financing models in place in Alberta with those of other jurisdictions.

Given the above, much of the discussion focused on the challenges community-based service providers (private business and non-profit) face in delivering high quality early childhood education and care within a predominantly market-based service model. Similarly, the

difficulties school boards face in supporting the increasing delivery of full-day kindergarten and junior kindergarten programs through the reallocation of instructional resources was a common topic for discussion.

While these discussions touched on larger questions around the appropriate level of public investment in early learning and care, the most effective strategies to deliver this investment, and what portion of the cost of services (if any) families should cover directly as a private expense, they did not resolve them. These key questions, therefore, require further consideration to better determine the respective positions of different stakeholders.

In addition, the tensions that arise in supporting the delivery of early childhood education and care services through a hybrid or combination financing model, that relies on public, private and community funding delivered through supply and demand side funding strategies, also require further consideration. Participants identified what they saw as inequities in the current funding between different programs and services (for example, those funded through the Education and Children and Youth Service Ministries) and the impacts that these inequities have on service delivery. They agreed that these inequities may make the transition towards a more integrated approach to service delivery more difficult given the probable goal of some service providers to retain their access to resources that they see as scarce and critical to their continued operation.

Finally, key questions around how additional public funding, delivered primarily through supply-side strategies (which participants generally favour) might change the culture and perhaps the nature of the small private businesses and community organizations that deliver the bulk of services for children under five years of age also require further exploration. These organizations would be required to meet new and higher standards around accountability, accessibility, affordability and quality – standards that may significantly change their current business models and practices. The ability or willingness of organizations to respond to these possible changes remains unclear.

4.4 The Delivery of Early Childhood Education and Care

Much of the participant discussions considered the delivery of early childhood education and care with a focus on the key questions of how best to increase both the quantity and quality of the services available. The notions of ‘scaling-up’ and ‘joining-up’ existing services figured prominently in these discussions, as did questions about the key aspects of quality and their translation into practice.

Participants raised important questions around how the possible expansion of services through a greater role for public bodies (school boards or municipalities) in managing and supporting service delivery might impact on current service providers. They saw some challenges for existing private business and non-profit service providers in the move towards a more public delivery model, with the potential for some service areas to expand at the perceived expense of others (for example, junior kindergarten and kindergarten services ahead of regulated child care services for younger children). Participants also cautioned that the future expansion of service may result in a widening of the gap between the services available to children and their families in the major urban centres and those available in smaller centres, given the public infrastructure challenges many smaller communities already face.

These concerns raise questions about how best to expand and better link services in ways that do not negatively impact existing services and which improve all families’ access to high quality services. They also generate questions about the most appropriate roles for different types of service providers (private businesses, community non-profit organizations, public service providers and non-regulated paid care givers) in a more organized public system of services.

The expansion of services in other jurisdictions suggest the need for a greater role for public institutions, given the challenges of taking small private and community-based service models to scale. How existing private business and non-profit service providers might best be accommodated within a more public service model in Alberta requires careful consideration, and the resolution of what may be seen as public, community and private interests.

Participant discussions of the need to increase the quality of early childhood education and care services reveal a parallel set of concerns. These concerns extend to the formal education and training requirements of early childhood educators, the future roles of early childhood educators in service delivery, and the process for the development and implementation of a provincial early education curriculum framework.

Participants raised questions about how the gap between the current levels of staff education and those proposed as part of a new service model could be closed and the implications of closing this gap on the current workforce. The requirement that staff working in regulated early learning settings with preschool age children have education at a diploma level (or even a four year degree level) would present a significant challenge given that around half the current work force has completed the current orientation course as their highest level of training. Participants advised that many of these staff may be forced to leave the field making the expansion of services even more challenging in the short and medium terms.

Conversely, as participants noted, the failure to raise the level of staff education and training presents a serious barrier to the delivery of services with a strong child development focus, and perhaps even calls into question the value of significant new public investments in service delivery for preschool children. As with the expansion of services, the key appears to be one of striking an appropriate balance.

As an adjunct to the proposed increase in formal training requirements, participants also raised questions about the future role of early childhood educators in service delivery. They advised of the need both to consider the appropriate staffing mix for any new junior kindergarten and expanded full-day kindergarten programs and to ensure that strategies are in place to address the potential movement of staff from community-based programs (private business and non-profit) to public organizations. This potential migration of a significant proportion of the best trained staff was seen as a critical problem to consider in advance of introducing expanded school-based programs.

Participants also considered the merits of a broad curriculum framework for early childhood education and care. They strongly argued that any curriculum framework must be informed by research on child development and the must reflect an appropriate early learning pedagogy. They expressed concerns that a curriculum framework developed without these influences might take on a more narrow focus with an emphasis on early learning more appropriate to older children. Again, while participants saw a curriculum framework as a valuable tool for strengthening program delivery, they raised questions about how such a curriculum would be developed and how it would be implemented both in community and school settings.

4.5 Leading Change in the Early Childhood Education and Care Field

Participants spoke of the challenges in advancing significant change in the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care. They noted the relative failure of previous change efforts, the complexity of reaching agreement on the directions for change, and the lack of resources available for stakeholders to play a strong role in the change process.

Participants agreed on the need for a broad range of stakeholder views and perspectives to inform any changes and the value of engaging parents and families in the discussion of new models of service delivery. They also noted the need to remain mindful of the political context for significant change in early childhood education and care.

Given the forum participants broad support for the move towards a more integrated and comprehensive approach to the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care, important questions remain about how best to initiate and support the change process. In those provinces that have recently introduced, or are embarking on, new models for the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care, the provincial government (or particular ministries within the government) has assumed a lead role in consulting with stakeholders, in developing the new models for service delivery, and in committing new resources to support their implementation.

At present, the interest or readiness of the provincial government to assume a similar leadership role is not clear. While the government has led similar change processes in other service areas

(including health and education) the desire to consider and support significant change in early childhood education and care may not be as strong, or as well-developed. In part, the current division of responsibilities for the funding and delivery of services between ministries makes the emergence of leadership more complex; although the main ministries of Children and Youth Services and Education have worked collaboratively on previous cross-ministerial initiatives that address the needs and concerns of children and families (for example, the Alberta Safe Communities Initiative).

Given the above, the field of early childhood education and care stakeholders may have to take on a more prominent leadership role to begin the process of seeking to advance significant change. This will require leaders from across the field to reach some consensus on the nature of changes required, the priorities for change, the key steps or actions required to advance change, and which organizations or entities are best placed to seek and advance change in key areas. Reaching agreement on these areas and strategies will require compromise on the part of all the parties involved – with a strong commitment to working to support those changes that are in the best interests of children and their families.