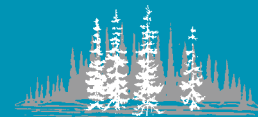


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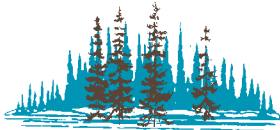
An Alternative Approach to the Funding and Delivery of
Early Learning and Care for Children and their Families



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Introduction

The benefits that children and their families gain from access to high quality early childhood education and care are well-documented.¹ A growing number of studies from the early childhood development field and beyond describe how high quality early learning and care helps children get a good start in life, provides important resources for families balancing the demands of work outside of the home with those of raising young children and ensures that communities remain supportive and vibrant places for young families.²

The majority of Alberta children 0 to 6 years of age now spend a significant portion of their early years in some form of non-parental care – much of which is provided outside of the family home. And as is the case in most Canadian provinces, many families in Alberta find it difficult to access high quality early learning and care. Despite significant recent increases in provincial funding, the demand for early learning and care continues to outstrip the supply. And where high quality learning and care is available it is often too expensive for families to afford.

Given these challenges a number of provinces have begun to reconsider how they approach the funding and delivery of early learning and care. Ontario and British Columbia, for example, have both taken bold steps in outlining new approaches and Ontario began the implementation of these in fall 2010. The respective provincial governments in the Maritimes and in Manitoba have each begun to consider how they can best support early learning and care. The result is a series of new initiatives that include the reorganization

of existing service providers as well as the consolidation of programs to form more integrated service platforms.

Inspired by this work, the current discussion paper focuses on an often overlooked aspect of the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care – that of the role of municipalities. Specifically, it outlines some of the history of municipal involvement in early learning and care in Alberta, describes the current four municipal models in Beaumont, Jasper, Drayton Valley and the Municipal District (MD) of Opportunity, and presents a preliminary analysis of the key characteristics and features of these models.

Through its review of the role of municipalities in early learning and care, the paper aims both to present information on the current municipal models and to promote discussion on the potential for such models to play a greater role in the Alberta early learning and care landscape. As Alberta examines how it might best increase its own investments in early learning and care a discussion of possible enhanced roles for municipal service delivery models appears one option worthy of consideration.

1 Early childhood education and care within the current paper includes those programs and services for children below the mandatory school age of six that include the elements of both physical care and education.

2 Pascal, C. (2009). *With Our Best Future in Mind: Summary of the Evidence*. Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario.

An Overview of Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta and Canada



The funding and delivery of early childhood education and care in Canada remains in an emergent state. The provinces retain primary responsibility for the funding and delivery of services, while the federal government mainly plays a supporting role through transfers that cover a portion of service costs. Except in Ontario, municipalities play a limited role in early learning and care.

In comparison to other modern economic nations, Canada's approach to the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care is considered fragmented and underdeveloped.³ Outside of Quebec, the majority of provinces support early learning and care through largely separate streams of public investment in early education, family support, and regulated child care programs. Families assume much of the service cost, and there are differing approaches to service delivery depending on the age of the child and the nature of the services provided. The supply of service remains insufficient to meet demand and there are concerns that, outside of publicly funded kindergarten, the quality of many programs is modest.⁴

In recognition of these challenges, a number of provinces have begun to rethink how they support early childhood education and care. Over the last five years, for example, almost all provinces have increased their investments in early learning and care, while most have also begun to re-examine how they approach its funding and delivery. Two common themes stand out in this re-examination: first, the linking of educational and community services to create a continuum of early learning and care; and second, a significant increase in the supply of service to better meet the growing demand.

Ontario has taken the boldest steps in its redesign of services. In fall 2010, the province began implementation of full-day learning for all four- and five-year-olds through the public education system, as well as the creation of a publicly funded network of neighbourhood Best Start Child and Family Centres under the systems management of municipalities. These Best Start Centres combine child care, family health, and parenting programs for families with very young children.⁵

Alberta has similarly increased its public investments in early childhood education and care. Beginning in 2008, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services introduced several new initiatives to increase the quantity and quality of services. It provided funding to support the creation of new child care spaces as well as wage enhancements for staff in accredited child care centres and family day homes. The Ministry further established a goal of ensuring that all families have access to affordable, quality early learning and care.⁶

Alberta Education, as part of its contribution to early education, provides funding for a 475-hour universal kindergarten program. It also allocates funding, through Early Childhood Services, for three- and four-year olds with special needs to attend education programs offered through their local schools or an approved service provider.

To extend the early learning available for children and families in need of additional supports prior to the mandatory school age of six, a growing number of school boards reallocate instructional dollars to provide full-day kindergarten for five-year olds as well as junior kindergarten programs for four-year-olds. They also seek further support from community sources to sustain these programs.

While Alberta's new public investments have eased some of the demand for early childhood education and care across the province, they have not been able to address fully the challenges families face in accessing high quality care in their local communities. At present, there are regulated early learning spaces (childcare centres, day homes, preschools and Kin Care) for around one in five children five years of age and under - the distribution of which varies considerably across the province. In many smaller centres, and in the Northwest and Northeast regions of the province, for example, families continue to have limited access to regulated early learning and care.

Furthermore, the quality of early learning, outside of that provided in junior kindergarten and kindergarten, appears modest; and with much of the service delivered through a market model, the cost is prohibitive for many low- and moderate-income families.⁷ The majority of service providers (businesses and non-profits) work independently from each other, and have limited capacity to provide services to communities that are economically marginal because of geography or socio-economic factors. They further have limited connections with local schools which makes the transition from community child care to part-day kindergarten programs a challenge for many children and families.

In brief, early childhood education and care in Alberta remains at somewhat of a crossroads. Despite increased public investments over the last five years, many families still face challenges in accessing high quality, affordable early childhood education and care in their home communities.

3 UNICEF. (2008). The Child Care Transition: A league table of early childhood education and care in the economically advanced countries. Innocenti Report Card, 8. Florence, IT: Innocenti Research Centre.

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2006). *Starting Strong*. Paris: OECD Secretariat.

4 Beach, J., Friendly, M., Ferns, C., Prabhu, N., & Forer, B. (2009). *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2008*. Toronto, ON: Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

5 Pascal, C. (2009). *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*. Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario.

6 Government of Alberta. (2008). *Ministry Strategic Framework for Creating Child Care Choices in Alberta*. Alberta Children and Youth Services.

7 The Muttart Foundation. 2010. *In the Best Interests of Children and Families: A Discussion of Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta*.



Alberta Municipalities Historical Role in the Funding and Delivery of Early Childhood Education and Care

Alberta municipalities currently play a limited role in the funding and delivery of early learning and care; although, this was not always the case. In the 1960s, as the growing demand for non-parental child care greatly outstripped the supply of services, Alberta municipalities were important leaders in developing high quality child care programs across the province.

The initial involvement of municipalities in early learning and care was linked, in large part, to changes in federal and provincial policy and legislation. The introduction of the federal Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) in 1966 and the provincial Preventive Social Services (PSS) Act shortly thereafter provided new monies and new vehicles to address social issues at the community level - including the provision of child care. The CAP established a 50/50 federal-provincial cost-sharing mechanism for social services, while the provincial PSS Act enabled municipalities to develop these services in response to local needs.

Through the PSS Act, participating municipalities received 80 percent funding (50 percent CAP monies, and 30 percent provincial monies) to cover the costs of preventive child care services, which they in turn matched with their own 20 percent. These monies,

dedicated for use in public or non-profit centres, enabled municipalities to provide subsidies for low-income families to access child care services.⁸ As a result, individual municipalities moved to introduce or expand child care services at the local level with a related goal of linking these services to other family resource and support programs.

By the mid 1970s, there were around sixty municipally supported child care programs across the province, as well as a smaller number of municipally operated centres in the cities of Edmonton, Calgary, Medicine Hat, and Grande Prairie. While the majority of the PSS supported centres were located in larger urban centres (Edmonton, Calgary, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Red Deer and Grande Prairie) they also extended into smaller communities such as High Level, Slave Lake and Claresholm.⁹

Municipally supported child care programs formed part of an emerging network of child care services across the province, which also included a growing number

⁸ Jenson, J & Mahon, R. 2002. *Bringing Cities to the Table: Child Care and Intergovernmental Relations*. Canadian Policy and Research Networks.

⁹ Langford, T. 2011. *Alberta's Day Care Controversy: From 1908 to 2009 And Beyond*. Athabasca University Press.

of centres run by commercial operators. The success of municipalities in accessing PSS monies meant that close to 50 percent of Preventive Social Services Funds were allocated to support child care by the mid-1970s. Concurrent with an increase in commercial child care, however, this growing allocation of PSS monies caused the provincial government to rethink its support for municipal child care.¹⁰

Thus, in the late 1970s, the provincial government, in response to the increasing demand for child care across the province, as well as the growth of private commercial child care, moved both to expand its role in the regulation of services, and to revise its funding guidelines. The government assumed responsibility for both the administration of child care services and for the funding of subsidies. Municipalities were no longer eligible to receive provincial support for child care under the PSS Act, and the province introduced new operating grants for both non-profit and for-profit child care centres to increase the supply of services. These changes fundamentally altered the funding model for municipally supported child care and effectively removed municipalities from a central role in the development and delivery of child care services.¹¹

In response to these changes, a number of municipalities, including Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, Grande Prairie, and Medicine Hat jointly negotiated an agreement with the province that enabled them to continue to receive federal CAP funds to cover a portion of their costs for non-profit child care.¹² As part of this agreement, the municipalities were required to increase the monies they provided for child care to match the federal funds, resulting in a 50/50 cost sharing of child care between the federal and municipal governments. The province, however, placed further restrictions on the expansion of municipally supported child care centres to control the total amount of federal funds disbursed to the municipalities. This agreement continued until 1995 when the federal government replaced the CAP with the Canada Health and Social Transfer.

The requirement that municipalities match federal funding for child care services resulted in a number of municipalities discontinuing their support given the challenges of covering an increased share of the costs. During the 1980s those municipalities that continued to support child care placed an emphasis on delivering high quality early learning and care that exceeded the

provincial requirements. This resulted in the municipally supported or operated centres becoming known as model child care centres or 'lighthouse' services.

By 1990, ten years after the province assumed responsibility for the funding and regulation of licensed child care, around thirty municipally supported child care programs continued to operate in the province extending from Medicine Hat in the south to Grande Prairie in the north. Edmonton remained the largest supporter of municipal child care with eighteen non-profit centres receiving funding to provide child care for low-income families. While the City of Edmonton focussed its efforts on supporting what were termed Municipally Approved Day Cares operated by community based non-profit organizations, other municipalities, including Calgary, Medicine Hat, and Red Deer chose to operate their own municipal child care centres.¹³

Over the next decade, the majority of these municipally supported child cares saw their funding reduced and most municipally run centres were transferred to either private non-profit or for-profit organizations. The last municipality to provide dedicated support to child care for preschool children was the City of Red Deer, which supported two non-profit centres until 2004.

The reasons individual municipalities ended their support for child care vary, although some common themes emerge. First, municipalities came under increasing political pressure to focus their resources on mandated service areas – which did not include child care. Second, the federal and provincial spending cuts of the early 1990s placed significant pressures on municipal budgets. Federal changes to the CAP program and the provincial government's reductions in municipal assistance grants and cuts to Family and Community Support Service funding left municipal governments with fewer resources to allocate to community needs and concerns – including child care. And third, the federal and provincial support for children and families shifted more to a focus on early intervention programs and services than support for early learning and care.

¹⁰ Lackey, J. 2001. FCSS: A grand lady with a colourful past and an honourable future. Presentation at the Jasper 2001 FCSSAA Conference.

¹¹ Langford. 2011. Alberta's Day Care Controversy.

¹² Jenson and Mahon. 2002. Bringing Cities to the Table.

¹³ Langford. 2011. Alberta's Day Care Controversy.

In the face of these economic and political challenges, municipalities largely discontinued their support for child care, effectively bringing to a close the period of significant municipal involvement in the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care.

nevertheless, represents an important variation on the predominant service funding and delivery model. The emergence and operation of these centres is described in more detail in the following section.

Today, a small municipal child care presence remains, one that is largely separate from this initial phase of municipal support. Four municipalities currently provide child care – Beaumont, Jasper, Drayton Valley and the Municipal District (MD) of Opportunity – all of which introduced their service after the province assumed responsibility for the regulation and funding of child care services.

This second group of municipal child care centres represents a smaller, more individual response to the challenge of providing families with access to high quality, affordable early learning and care – particularly in marginal economic markets – but one that,





Alberta Municipalities Current Role in the Funding and Delivery of Early Childhood Education and Care

Four municipalities support the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care for preschool children: Beaumont, Jasper, Drayton Valley and the MD of Opportunity. The municipal child care centres in Beaumont and Jasper have operated since the 1980s, while those in Drayton Valley and the MD of Opportunity are much newer having opened in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

Each municipality approaches its support for early childhood education and care in a different way, reflecting both its local community needs as well as the resources that it can allocate for early learning and care. While there are similarities between the municipalities both in terms of the strengths of their respective approaches and the challenges that they face in supporting and delivering service at the local level, there are also differences. Drawing on interviews with key stakeholders in the four communities, the key aspects of the development and operation of these four municipal services are summarized below.

The Town of Beaumont

The Town of Beaumont, on the southern margins of the City of Edmonton, is one of the fastest growing small urban centres in Alberta and Canada. It is a young and prosperous community with a population approaching 13,000. Since its inception as a town in 1973, the local population has increased ten-fold and Beaumont is home to a growing number of families with young children – many of whom travel to Edmonton to work on a daily basis. Over the last five years, the population of families with young children has increased by close to 50 percent and additional future growth is anticipated.

Municipal Early Childhood Education and Care

The Town introduced its municipal child care services in 1980, shortly after the provincial government assumed responsibility for the funding and regulation of child care for preschool children across the province. Since its inception, the municipal child care program has expanded from a starting point of twenty-nine spaces with the addition of programs for infants and for school-aged children. The municipal child care now comprises fifty-eight spaces for preschool age children as well as

sixty spaces in out-of-school care (OSC) for children of school age. The Town proposes to add a further twenty spaces in September 2011.

From 2005 to 2010 the Town also operated the Beaumont Family Day Home Agency, which provided family day home care for over eighty children. The Town transferred the operation of the Day Home Agency to an external party in 2010, in an effort to control its rising costs for the support of child care.

The Town of Beaumont's current five-year business plan for municipal child care (which covers the period 2007 – 2011) identifies the core goal of providing high quality child care that is accessible and developmentally appropriate for children of different ages. The plan, which is updated annually, identifies the need to expand the services available to meet the growing demand for child care for children 0 – 12 years of age.

At present, the Town of Beaumont Early Learning and Child Care Centre represents the only regulated child care centre in the community. And with a long waiting list for regulated child care, families in some cases can wait up to three years before a space becomes available.

The Town oversees the administration of the Early Learning and Child Care Centre and the related out-of-school care (OSC), and provides an annual financial subsidy to support the operation of both programs. Two supervisors manage the day-to-day operations of the child care services, both of whom report to the Town's Manager of Community and Protective Services. The manager, in turn, reports to the Town Council. A recently formed Child Care Advisory Board, that includes the two program supervisors (as ex officio members), community members and a Town Council member, provides oversight for the child care programs and advice to the Beaumont Town Council on child care services.

The Town allocates municipal resources to support the two programs – and budgets for these resources to cover a maximum of 20 percent of program costs. The child care programs (both preschool and school age) cover the remaining 80 percent of operating costs through parent fees, provincial accreditation support and fundraising. A Friends of Child Care Society was formed in 2000 to coordinate community fundraising efforts both to offset programs costs, and to limit the municipality's exposure

to the rising costs of municipal child care.

In 2010 the Town received one-time grant funding through the provincial government's space creation strategy to cover a portion of the costs of increasing the number of child care spaces.

As outlined in the child care business plan, the Town works to ensure that the services it provides are of a high quality. The preschool child care program is housed in the municipal recreational centre while the out-of-school care recently relocated to a new building adjacent to a school site. The programs are provincially accredited, and the majority of the staff team is certified at the Child Development Supervisor level, which exceeds the licensing requirements.

The municipal funding support enables the preschool and school age programs to provide staff with wages that are higher than those in comparable child care settings. It also provides resources for staff development. These enhanced working conditions have helped to ensure staff continuity – particularly in the preschool child care program, although there are still some staff retention challenges in the school-age program – just as there are in other similar programs across the province. The recent closer integration of the preschool and school-age programs has helped to improve staff retention.

The parent fees for child care for preschool and school age children differ for local residents and those from outside of the geographic community. Families from outside of the community pay fees that are around 30 percent higher than those for families who live in the community. On average, fees for local families are similar to those in commercial and non-profit child care centres in the Edmonton Region, while those for nonlocal families exceed these average fees. The number of families eligible for a provincial subsidy to cover a portion of child care costs is lower than the average for the Edmonton region as a whole which reflects, in part, the higher family incomes in the Town itself.

Some thirty years after its introduction, municipal child care continues to represent an important service that the Town provides for its growing number of families with young children. The Town promotes the municipal child care as one of the key aspects of the high quality of life that it offers families.

The Town Council remains committed to ensuring that local families have access to high quality early childhood education and care in the community. To this end, the Town continues to look at options for increasing the supply of service to meet the growing demand, while also working to control the costs that service expansion brings.

The Municipality of Jasper

The Municipality of Jasper is located in the Jasper National Park approximately 300 kilometres west of Edmonton. The municipality shares responsibility for the governance of the town site with the federal Parks Canada Agency but has authority over the majority of municipal matters. The Jasper town site serves as the major commercial centre for the National Park, and receives over 2,000,000 tourist visitors annually.

The Municipal population is just under 5,000, which includes both permanent residents, who live in the community year-round, and seasonal or non-permanent

residents who come to work in the tourism related industries. A large number of young adults, some with young families, work in the tourism related industries resulting in a high demand for early learning and care services.

Municipal Early Childhood Education and Care Services

The Municipality has administered and funded the delivery of child care services since the early 1980s. The Municipal Council provided the initial leadership for the development of child care services in the community with the goal of promoting Jasper as good place to live and work. In developing its municipal child care services, the Council took into account the relatively high cost of living and working in the community and the barrier that these costs present to families with young children. As in the Town of Beaumont, the Municipality introduced its child care services after the province reassumed responsibility for the regulation of child care.



The Municipality delivers early childhood education and care through a non-profit entity – the Jasper Centre for Early Childhood Learning and Care: Meeting of the Waters. The Jasper Centre operates from a purpose-built facility and offers two early learning streams: regulated child care and nursery (or preschool) services. The Centre has recently added out-of-school care programs for kindergarten children and for children in grades one through six which support the goal of providing families with a single access point for a range of early education services.

The Centre has child care spaces for fifty-two children with an additional forty-four spaces available in the nursery school program. The out-of-school care can accommodate fifty children. The Centre is currently renovating its child care to increase the number of spaces to more than eighty.

The Municipality retains responsibility for the administration of the Jasper Centre. The Community and Family Services manager oversees its operations and provides guidance and leadership to the Centre program director. A parent advisory group provides input on the Centre's daily operations and is also responsible for additional fundraising for special projects, such as the new playground. The Community Services manager

provides the Municipal Council with periodic reports on the Centre's operations.

The Municipality covers the Centre's space and utility costs, and provides an annual operating grant (\$200,000 in the 2010 fiscal year) to support the child care and nursery programs for children, birth to school-aged. The Municipality also supports the school-age programs as well as summer recreational programs.

The Centre aims to provide high quality early learning and care for the children and their families. The staff who work with preschool children are certified at the Child Development Supervisor level and many also have additional training. Staff salaries, and accompanying benefits, are competitive and above the provincial average, reflecting the higher cost of living in Jasper. The Centre aims to ensure that parent fees remain reasonable given the cost of delivering high quality early learning and care. The parent fees for the centre-based child care exceed the provincial average, although parents are eligible for a close to 50 percent discount on the fees for additional children. This discount significantly reduces the cost of care for parents with two or more children in the Centre.

The preschool child care program is provincially accredited, while the school age program is currently going through the accreditation process. At present, around half of the families with children in the child care program receive provincial subsidies to cover a portion of their care costs.

The Centre also provides families with access to additional early childhood services and supports that are available through the Municipality. These additional services include community outreach, assistance with applications for child care subsidies, respite care, and support and care for special needs children.

The Municipality views its support for early childhood education care as an important component of its Community Sustainability Plan. The Jasper Centre is the only regulated child care centre in the community and provides a key resource and service for children and their families.





The Town of Drayton Valley

The Town of Drayton Valley lies 140 kilometres south west of Edmonton and serves as a regional centre for the oil industry as well as for the surrounding rural communities. The Town has a relatively youthful population and is home to a growing number of families with young children, many of whom move to the community for employment. As a result of its strong growth over the last decade, the Town's population is now close to 7,000 residents.

Municipal Early Childhood Education and Care

The Town introduced its municipally funded and delivered child care for preschool children in 2008 after an extensive period of community planning and consultation. The Town identified the need for affordable, accessible child care as part of its Social Development Plan adopted in 2005. The Town Council saw child care as an important resource for families with young children - one that had the potential to contribute to the community's economic and social development. Prior to the introduction of the municipal child care centre, there were no regulated centre-based child care services in the community with families accessing mostly unregulated day home services or relying on family and neighbours for child care.

In advance of introducing municipal child care, the Town undertook a feasibility study for a child care centre. The feasibility study considered a number of factors, including the demographic profile of the

community, with a focus on the number of families with young children in the community, as well as these families' participation in the workforce. The Town also brought key community stakeholders together to consider the appropriate structure and function for a municipal child care centre that could serve between seventy-five and 100 preschool children.

The feasibility study, and the associated stakeholder consultations, helped shape the proposed child care model – with an emphasis on developing an early childhood education and care centre that could serve both as a service hub for parents and families and provide them with a range of service options. The Town recruited a program manager with broad experience in centre-based early learning and care to help guide the Centre's design and implementation.

The Early Childhood Development Centre (ECDC) opened in 2008. It is located in a modern, purpose-built facility designed to support all aspects of child development, situated close to the centre of the town and adjacent to a park area. The Centre provides child care for preschool age children as well as out-of-school care for school age children. It is licensed for eighty-three spaces for children from one to twelve years of age.

The Town of Drayton Valley owns and operates the Centre. The Program Manager, who is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the Centre, reports to the Manager of Community Services, who in turn reports to an operating board that includes both Town Council and community members. The board is responsible for the Centre's annual budget.

The Town made significant financial contributions to develop and build the Centre – and provides ongoing support to cover its operational costs. The Town supported an initial capital investment of over \$1 million to construct the Centre, which it funded through a debentured loan. The ongoing operational commitment is in the region of \$80,000 to \$100,000 per year. The Town has requested that the Centre undertake its own fundraising with the goal of generating additional annual revenues of between \$30,000 and \$40,000. The Town's long-term goal is for the Centre to operate on a break-even basis.

The Centre aims to provide high quality early learning and care that is affordable and accessible. Its programs

include a focus on supporting learning through play with a related emphasis on providing families with appropriate early intervention supports and services. The Centre can accommodate children with special needs, and through its programs children and their families also have access to related health and educational services.

The Centre has recruited a staff team that includes a complement of Child Development Supervisors who are in each of the main program rooms. Staff members have opportunities for ongoing professional development and the Centre works to provide specific training sessions in the local community.

To ensure that the Centre's programs remain affordable, parent fees are lower than the provincial average for similar programs. The majority of children who attend the Centre live in single parent families, many of whom receive provincial subsidy support for child care costs. The Centre serves both the Town as well as the surrounding municipal district; although local families receive a priority in accessing the Centre.

As a complement to the centre-based child care programs and services, the Town has also established a family day home agency to increase the child care options available for local families. The day home agency oversees and supports a small number of day home operators who provide early learning and care for close to thirty children.



Municipal District of Opportunity

The MD of Opportunity is located in the North Central region of the province, 375 kilometres north of Edmonton. The MD covers a large area and was formally incorporated as a Municipal District in 1995. The region, which borders on the Wood Buffalo Municipal District - home to the Alberta oil sands, has recently seen significant economic development linked to both the oil and forestry industries.

The population of the MD is close to 5,000 which includes 2,000 residents who live on the Bigstone Cree Nation reserves. Wabasca-Desmarais serves as the major centre for the MD and is home to 3,300 residents, including members of the Bigstone Cree Nation. A series of smaller centres distributed across the MD – Calling Lake, Red Earth Creek and Sandy Lake - house much of the remaining population. The MD has a youthful population which includes a growing number of Aboriginal families with young children.

Municipal Early Childhood Education and Care

The MD of Opportunity introduced its municipal child care in fall 2009 – making it the most recent of the four municipal child care providers in the province. The MD initially established child care and out-of-school care programs in Wabasca and followed these services with the addition of further child care and out-of-school programs in Calling Lake and Red Earth Creek in 2010.

The MD administration and Council provided the leadership for the development of municipal child

care for preschool and school age children. Both view quality child care as key to the development of young children and a significant contributor to family well-being. The MD administration and Council identified the need for the municipal district to play a leadership role in supporting child care in the region, given the absence of regulated child care services. Prior to the implementation of the municipal child care in Wabasca, families with young children in the MD had almost no access to regulated early learning and care.

The first child care site in Wabasca is housed in the Northern Lakes College facility, using a space that was purpose-built for a previous early learning and care centre that closed some years earlier. The MD developed the site with partial support from the provincial child care space creation grants – support which the MD also accessed to establish the subsequent child care sites in Calling Lake and Red Earth Creek. The Wabasca child care site initially opened with thirty-eight spaces for preschool age children and nine staff. The Calling Lake and Red Earth Creek sites are approximately half the size of the Wabasca site.

The MD of Opportunity maintains responsibility for the administration of the child care programs. It holds the licenses for the individual program sites and the Director of Community Services oversees their operations. A child care manager or coordinator is responsible for the day-to-day operations at each program site and helps to ensure that the program remains responsive to community needs.

The MD's guidelines for the programs place an emphasis on the delivery of quality child care that supports and affirms Aboriginal culture and language. The MD anticipates that its child care programs will receive provincial accreditation by 2012.

The manager of the Wabasca centre is certified as a Child Development Supervisor while the majority of staff is working towards certification at the Child Development Assistant level. The MD supports the staff members in their professional development. Child care staff members receive pay and benefits based on a municipal salary grid for equivalent positions. This raises their salaries and benefits above the average levels found in child care centres across the province.

The MD Council sets the child care fees as part of its



annual budgeting process for the Municipal District. To ensure that the child care is affordable for families, the MD establishes a maximum fee amount that parents pay for each child who accesses care in their family. The maximum fee amount takes into account whether families are eligible for a provincial child care subsidy – this ensures that care is affordable for families who receive subsidies as well as those who do not.

The maximum fees, and the maximum parent-paid portion of the fees, are much lower than fees at comparable centres, especially those in the adjacent Northeast Region, which has the highest average child care fees in the province. The MD does not require the centres to fundraise to cover operational or program costs but rather allocates municipal resources to cover the gap between program costs and revenues. The MD also assumes much of the cost for the administration of each program site through its overall management of child care services.

As the most recent municipality in the province to play a direct role in the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care, the MD of Opportunity has taken a strong leadership role in its support for quality early childhood education and care that remains affordable and accessible to local families.



The Strengths and Challenges of Municipal Early Childhood Education and Care

Municipal early childhood education and care in Beaumont, Jasper, Drayton Valley and the MD of Opportunity represents an important variation on the common model for the funding and delivery of services across the province. In each of these communities, the town or municipal district played a leadership role in developing regulated early education and care services and continues to support these services through the allocation of municipal resources.

Through its support for early childhood education and care each municipality works to address some, if not all, of the challenges that characterize the funding and delivery of service province-wide. Specifically, they each work, in different ways, to ensure that local families have access to regulated child care that is affordable; that the services provided are of a higher quality than might normally be anticipated in similar settings; that early education and care services link with other community supports; and that public investments in early childhood education and care are presented as important contributors to community economic and social well-being.

The municipalities' approach to the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care provides a basis for identifying the main strengths of municipal

child care both in the four communities and potentially beyond. It also reveals some of the challenges that municipalities face in supporting early childhood education and care.

The Strengths of Municipal Child Care

Four main strengths of municipal child care stand-out. These are by nature linked and even overlap; although for ease of discussion they are considered individually.

Responsive to Local Needs

In Beaumont, Jasper, and Drayton Valley municipally supported child care represents the only centre-based care available in the local community. In the MD of Opportunity, outside of the community of Wabasca which also includes a recently established child care centre operated by the Big Stone Cree Nation, the municipal child care programs in Red Earth Creek and Calling Lake are the only regulated care available for families.

Each municipality has overcome one of the most significant challenges facing early childhood

education and care – namely, the delivery of service in communities that are not able to support or sustain child care through a market model. Across Alberta, early childhood education and care services, with the exception of those that target populations considered ‘at risk,’ are more readily established and sustained in communities with well-developed service economies or strong non-profit sectors. In these communities, a market model for child care has the potential to match the local demand for service with some supply; although even in these situations the level of service may be unstable and is often insufficient to meet community needs.

In more isolated or smaller markets, however, in which families have modest incomes, in which children have special cultural or social needs, and in which there are increased costs for all services, the market delivery model encounters what may be broadly described as ‘market failure’. In these environments, private business and community-based organizations face significant

challenges in financing the development of services, in recovering program costs through program revenues and in developing and maintaining the organizational infrastructure (including the recruitment and retention of qualified staff) required to deliver services.

The current distribution of early childhood education and care services across the province reflects these challenges. Outside of major centres, for example, many families continue to have limited or no access to regulated child care. In these situations, municipal investment represents one of the few options available to support service delivery that is responsive to local needs.

In Jasper, Drayton Valley, and the MD of Opportunity, the relative isolation of the community, the elevated costs of developing and delivering services, and the low or modest household incomes of many local families with young children make for difficult environments in which to deliver quality early childhood education and care through a market model. In Beaumont, where there



is a long list of families waiting to access municipal child care, the community's close proximity to existing services in the City of Edmonton, as well as the high costs of developing services locally, also seemingly present barriers for services. Through their leadership and public investments, each of the four municipalities has overcome the limitations of the market model in responding to the child care needs of families in more isolated or smaller market environments.

The Provision of High Quality, Affordable Early Learning and Care

In addition to being responsive to local family needs, the municipal early education and care services in Beaumont, Jasper, Drayton Valley and the MD of Opportunity appear to be of a higher quality than might normally be anticipated in similar market settings. Families further pay fees that are, in the main, below the provincial average for similar levels of care.

The well-established municipal child care centres in Beaumont and Jasper have staff teams with levels of formal education and training that exceed the provincial norm. The majority of staff in both municipalities is certified at the highest Child Development Supervisor level and both municipalities provide additional resources to support continuous staff development.

The more recently established child care centres in Drayton Valley and in the MD of Opportunity have staff team profiles that are similar to those found in smaller centres across the province. Both municipalities are committed, however, to increasing the formal level of staff training and both provide staff with enriched professional development opportunities – something generally not available in private non-profit and commercial child care settings. The MD of Opportunity, for example, works closely with Grande Prairie Regional College to provide its child care staff with access to early childhood development training, and also places an emphasis on ensuring that the program model supports and reflects the Aboriginal culture and language of the children and their families.

As a further dimension of quality, the physical program sites in Drayton Valley, Beaumont and Jasper were all developed with the specific purpose of supporting the delivery of early childhood education and care. The Town of Drayton Valley, for example, designed and

constructed a purpose-built facility for its child care centre that is centrally located in the community. The facility design draws on the early learning research that identifies the key elements of high quality early learning environments.

In addition to supporting the delivery of high quality early learning and care, the four municipalities also place an emphasis on ensuring that their services remain affordable for local families. Both the MD of Opportunity and the Town of Drayton Valley have set parent fees at below average market rates to ensure that the services remain affordable for local families. The Drayton Valley child care centre serves a large number of single parents with modest family incomes, while almost all the families that access services at the three program sites in the MD of Opportunity live in low income households.

The Town of Beaumont and Municipality of Jasper establish fee schedules for local parents that are similar to the provincial average for centre-based child care. In Jasper, families receive a significant fee discount if they have more than one child in child care, thus reducing the overall household cost per family.

Integrated Care and Support for Families from a Stable Organizational Base

Through their support for early childhood education and care the four municipalities bring stability to the services children and their families receive. They also work to link municipal child care with other community services, thus enabling families to benefit from a more integrated approach to care and support.

Each municipality further supports and invests in the child care centre's organizational infrastructure, which forms the foundation for the sustained delivery of high quality service. Program and supervisory staff are municipal employees and receive the workplace supports and benefits that flow from this larger organizational base. Supervisory staff members, who oversee the program sites, receive support from senior municipal staff, who, in turn, provide management assistance and program oversight.

The municipalities further resource and support key organizational systems, which are often lacking or absent in many small commercial or non-profit

child care centres. Municipal support for financial management, information technology, and strategic planning and development, for example, enables the early childhood education and care staff to focus its efforts on program delivery – a benefit that few senior staff in traditional child care centres enjoy.

Municipal support can also help early childhood education and care services respond to external changes in their service environments. The cyclical nature of much of the Alberta economy, for example, means that market model services must accommodate periods of relative boom and decline with the accompanying fluctuations that these can bring in the demand for service, access to an appropriate workforce as well as changes in program delivery costs. Ongoing public support can help to even out these fluctuations, and provides municipal child care with a greater ability or robustness to respond to changes in the service environment while maintaining the delivery of a high quality service.

The municipalities' direct role in early learning and care also provides the opportunity for linkages between child care and other services and supports for families. Thus, the municipal child care program setting can serve as a site for the delivery of other municipal and community services as well as an entry-point for families to access a range of services. These connections contribute to a more integrated approach to child and family support – one which breaks down the barriers that families face in accessing multiple services each with their own entry points, models of delivery and eligibility criteria.



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An Elevated Community Profile for Early Childhood Education and Care

Municipal support for early childhood education and care has the potential to raise the profile of early learning and care in the community while also ensuring that the community remains a good place for families to raise young children. Indeed, each of the four municipalities that support child care highlights its importance as a local resource that contributes to the community quality of life and well-being.

The municipalities' investments in child care indicate the level of importance they attach to early childhood education and care and help position early learning as a public good with attendant public benefits. This is not to suggest that municipal support for early learning and care reflects complete agreement within a community of its value, but it certainly provides the basis for considering the role of public services in supporting children and their families.

The prominent role of municipal child care in Beaumont, Jasper, Drayton Valley, and the MD of Opportunity models the importance of providing families with access to early learning and care and has the potential to sensitize the broader community to the presence and needs of young children and their families.

The Challenges Facing Municipal Child Care

The delivery of municipal child care requires ongoing public investment and the development and maintenance of local political support, both of which can present challenges for a municipality.

The Financial Challenges for Municipal Child Care

The predominant market model for early childhood education and care results in families covering the bulk of the costs for their children to access regulated child care. While provincial subsidies for families with modest household incomes, and operational support for accredited service providers primarily through staff wage enhancements, provide some support for the

delivery of service, they are not sufficient to overcome the challenges of delivering high quality early learning and care in marginal economic markets.

The four municipalities that deliver early childhood education and care must, therefore, subsidize the operation of the service to ensure that it remains viable and responsive to community needs. This requires each municipality to draw on its own tax base revenues to develop services and to support their ongoing operation. The provincial government's allocation of modest capital grants to support the creation of child care spaces across the province provided some financial assistance to the Town of Drayton Valley and the MD of Opportunity in developing their municipal child care services. These monies, however, were not sufficient to cover more than a small portion of the costs involved.



With the exception of Beaumont, which seeks to cover a fixed portion of the child care operating costs (around 20 percent) the other municipalities establish annual funding amounts to cover operations. In the absence of municipal financial support, the child care programs would need to make substantial changes to the services they provide to remain sustainable – likely either a reduction in the quality of the service, or alternatively a significant increase in parent fees.

In the smaller more isolated communities of Jasper, Drayton Valley and the MD of Opportunity it appears unlikely that the existing child care services could be sustained without municipal support. The high costs of service delivery and the limited ability of families to pay higher parent fees for service would make the service

uneconomic. Some form of ongoing municipal financial support, therefore, appears central to the sustainable operation of quality, centre-based municipal child care.

The Political Challenges for Municipal Child Care

The financial investments that municipalities make in early childhood education and care are contingent upon the development and maintenance of local political support. Municipal councils must see these investments as returning significant benefits to the local community, as must the residents that elect them to office, if the support is to be sustained over an extended period of time.



Given the provincial government's primary responsibility for the funding and regulation of early childhood education and care, municipalities have no legislated obligation to play an active role in the funding and delivery of service. Municipal councils must, therefore, justify or explain the expenditure of municipal resources in an area of non-mandated service delivery, perhaps at the perceived expense of other mandated areas of service, if the service is to continue. During times of significant fiscal restraint, or rising service costs, this may become more challenging.

In the four municipalities that actively support the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care, both the municipal administration and the elected councils have played, and continue to play, strong leadership roles in support of service delivery. In some cases this leadership has taken the form of 'local champions' or individual leadership, while in others it has been more collective in nature. What seems normal is for it to evolve and change over time.

The regular electoral changes in municipal councils, allied with the periodic changes in senior staff within municipal administrations, means that some significant form of local political support for public investments in early childhood education and care must be sustained, and perhaps nurtured, on an ongoing basis if the service is to continue. This requires the ongoing development and reconsideration of the arguments in support of municipal investments, given the relatively low levels of provincial supply-side funding available to cover the costs of service delivery.

At the local community level, once the service is established as a legitimate area for municipal investment, with perceived benefits to families with young children as well as to the broader community, the arguments for continued support may be easier to advance. Questions around the appropriate level of investment or subsidy, however, appear likely to remain.





Municipal Child Care in Alberta – Options for a New Provincial-Municipal Partnership

The direct involvement of Alberta municipalities in the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care for pre-school age children remains limited. Across the province, a broad array of private business and community-based organizations deliver the bulk of early learning and care using a predominantly market model. Provincial funding is available to improve access for families with young children who live in households with modest incomes, while accredited child care services receive some support to help cover a portion of operational costs (mainly wage enhancements for staff).

The municipalities of Beaumont, Jasper, Drayton Valley, and the Municipal District of Opportunity provide a variation on this dominant model. Each funds and delivers early childhood education services in their local community and thereby provides an important service for families that might otherwise not exist. They have responded to unmet child care needs in their own communities, and in three of the four communities provide the only regulated centre-based child care available for children and families.

The child care services provided are responsive to local needs and are of a quality that exceeds much of that available in comparable communities across the

province. Through the allocation of public resources, financial and non-financial, the four municipalities have overcome some of the challenges that characterize the funding and delivery of early learning across the province. They have ensured that quality early childhood education is available in their local community, and that this care remains affordable for families. They have further worked to link municipal child care to other community services, providing families with more ready access to a broader range of supports.

The primary role of the provincial government in the funding and regulation of early childhood education and care, and its support for a market model of service delivery, means that municipalities receive the same support for the delivery of service as do other eligible service providers. The fiscal relationship between the province and municipalities further means that cities, towns, and municipal districts have limited revenues to support early learning and care and must allocate resources from other areas. While municipalities are eligible to receive provincial support for preventive social services, as part of the Family and Community Support Services Program, they cannot use these monies to support child care for preschool children.

The limited access of many Alberta families to high

quality, affordable child care, especially in smaller, more isolated communities, suggests the need for new funding and delivery models to overcome the challenges inherent in the current market model. One possible option is that of a new partnership between the province and municipalities to increase families' access to early childhood education and care at the local level.

Nationally and provincially, discussions around services for children and families have provided a basis for rethinking relations between the different levels of government with a common theme of moving decision-making to the local community level. Nationally, for example, the Social Union Framework Agreement seeks to situate the responsibility for policy choice more at the provincial level while the Provincial Family and Community Support Services legislation establishes a partnership between the province and municipalities. The latter provides the municipalities with per capita funding to support a broad array of community-based preventive social services.

Moving forward, there appears value in the province and municipalities considering the merits of a similar structure to provide additional fiscal support for

municipalities to develop and sustain local child care services that complement and enhance the existing private services. Thus, through new agreements, the province, the regional Child and Family Service Authorities and interested municipalities would work together, to support early learning and care that is of a high quality and accessible for families.

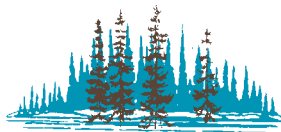
As part of such an agreement, the province and the regional authorities would recognize the municipalities as preferred partners in extending or sustaining early childhood education and care services in communities that are currently poorly served by the market model. Such an approach would seem particularly useful in smaller urban and rural centres. In these communities, the provincial government, working through the local regional authority, would provide capital funding and operational support to enable municipalities to develop child care services.

The proposed relationship could draw on some of the key principles included in the current Family and Community Support Services legislation. It could, for example, require both provincial and municipal financial support, with municipalities free to determine whether or not to participate. The intent of these new partnerships would not be to replace existing services, but rather to extend early learning and care to new communities.

High quality, affordable early childhood education and care for children and their families represents an important public good with significant public benefits. Based on the experiences in Beaumont, Jasper, Drayton Valley, and the MD of Opportunity, there appears to be significant value in municipalities playing a greater role in supporting local service delivery.

If municipal governments are to play a greater role in the provision of early learning and care, however, they require an increase in their fiscal capacity to support service delivery on a sustained basis allied with new mechanisms to help integrate and coordinate municipal child care services with the existing community services. In combination these two changes have the potential to increase the access that Alberta families, particularly those in smaller or more isolated centres, have to affordable, high quality early childhood education and care.





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