

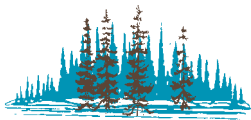
Toward a Provincial Framework for Early Learning and Care in Alberta

A Draft Framework Design for Discussion



Prepared by The Muttart Foundation

1150 Scotia Place
10060 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
T5J 3R8
www.muttart.org



The Muttart Foundation

With the support of:

UpStart, Champions for Children and Youth
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Introduction



In fall 2012 the Muttart Foundation, Success By 6 and Calgary UpStart hosted a series of seven consultations with early learning and care stakeholders across the province. The consultations, supported with funding from the Ministries of Human Services and Education, asked an invited group of 220 professional staff and volunteers, all of whom work in the early learning and care field, to consider the possible design and content of a new provincial framework to guide the funding and delivery of early learning and care in Alberta.

The services and programs that formed the focus for the discussions are those that include both an early learning and a care component (centre-based child care, family day homes and group family child care, preschools, Head Start programs, as well as pre-kindergarten and kindergarten commonly delivered in school-based settings). The discussions themselves explored how these services and programs might, over time, be redesigned to form a more closely integrated system – one that better meets the needs of all of Alberta’s young children below the mandatory school age and their families.

In Alberta, as in other provinces, these services have developed over time under the shared jurisdiction and oversight of both human (or social) service and education ministries. And while they all support the early learning and care of our youngest citizens they commonly operate in isolation from each other and have the capacity to serve only a portion of the young children and their families who require service. The goal of more closely integrating and expanding these services to better meet the growing number of families that rely on them is one that jurisdictions across Canada and beyond are now working to address.

The current draft framework draws on the insights of those stakeholders who participated in the regional consultations,

as well as the emerging body of research on early learning and care. It starts from the widely supported premise that effective early learning and care rests on the development of supportive, nurturing relationships between children and their caregivers - relationships that begin with a deep understanding of children and their development and extend to an authentic knowledge of and engagement with the families and communities in which they live.

More broadly, early learning and care forms one component of a strong set of family policies that, if done well, can contribute to positive outcomes for all children and their families. Done poorly, however, it may result in few if any benefits and may even do harm for those children who are the most vulnerable.

The framework presents a starting point for discussion. It fits well within the Government of Alberta's work on a larger social policy framework and forms one potential element of a broader early childhood development strategy. The framework presents some ideas for change, and outlines some key strategies to support the expansion and closer integration of early learning and care services in the province.

Moving Toward an Alberta Early Learning and Care System

The discussion of early learning and care remains complex. It raises important questions about the values, principles and desired outcomes that we hold for children and childhood, as well as more pragmatic concerns about how services are organized, funded and delivered.

The move toward an early learning and care system will require leadership, collaboration, discussion and the commitment of time, energy and resources from government, as well as the many service providers and individual caregivers who work with young children and their families. Parents and families will need opportunities to share their insights into how their children's early learning and care might be best supported. The best interests of children and their families must remain central to the redesign of early learning and care in Alberta, as must the realization that significant change is required in how services are organized, funded and delivered if we are to support better outcomes for all our young children and their families.

The different components of the proposed provincial framework can help provide the foundation for how community and government partners can work together with parents and families. While government and community partners will have different roles, together they

will share the responsibility for helping families access the early learning and care services and supports their children need. The main areas of focus for government will include setting policy direction, improving cross-ministry coordination and collaboration, overall system planning and management (including system-wide data collection and reporting) and determining and supporting an appropriate public and private financing strategy. Community service providers will share responsibility for delivering high quality evidence-based services, for ensuring the most effective use of public and private funds and for achieving service outcomes.

The significant nature of the changes proposed demands that the individual elements of the framework be considered and translated into practice through a series of phases or steps over time. Each of the changes considered and implemented, however, must align with the larger vision, goals and principles that will guide the design and delivery of services. Each dimension of the framework will further require some measure of consideration and implementation before a truly integrated system for early learning and care emerges.

A New Vision for Early Learning and Care in Alberta



Over the last two generations, Alberta families have become more diverse in their composition, their cultural background and their daily life circumstances. And while the family remains the major influence on how children develop, most of Alberta's young children now spend much of their early years in some form of non-parental care outside of the family home, as their parents strive to balance their work, education and caring responsibilities.

These early years of a child's life have a profound impact on their health, development and learning. Young children encounter their worlds through a series of experiences and relationships, the quality, timing and nature of which have the potential to either support or limit their development. Positive, nurturing experiences during their early years can help children to thrive and prosper; prolonged stressful or toxic ones can result in their considerable unhappiness and limit their growth and development.

Albertans want the best for young children and their families. The Provincial Government's commitment to early childhood development as a priority area for new public policy reflects the importance Albertans place on ensuring that all children get a good start in life. It underscores our collective commitment to work together to ensure that Alberta remains a good place for children and families to live: a place that provides all of its youngest citizens with positive, nurturing experiences during their early years

The proposed new vision for early learning and care in Alberta is bold:

An Alberta in which all children 0 to 6 and their families have access to high quality early learning and care that matches their individual needs and circumstances.



What We Want for Our Young Children and Their Families - The Goals for Early Learning and Care

Young children are born with a natural curiosity and interest in the world around them. Their early years are a time of rapid growth and development as they expand their individual capacities and dispositions to learn, through nurturing relationships and experiences.

Parents and families are their children's primary caregivers and first teachers. They have the largest influence on their development and provide the foundation for their learning, growth and well-being. All parents and families can benefit from access to high quality early learning and care services during the critical period of the early years. These services help them to balance the demands of work inside and outside of the family home, deepen their connections with the communities in which they live and work, and provide their children with opportunities that contribute positively to their lifelong learning and well-being.

Governments, communities, community organizations and business can all support families in their parenting roles by helping to ensure that high quality services are in place. They can help to shape and build a province in which all children and parents are valued and supported, and in which all parents and families with young children have the opportunity to participate fully in their communities' social, cultural and economic lives.



With these ideas in mind the goals for early learning and care in Alberta cover three related areas:

To foster and support children's early learning and well-being as a foundation for a lifetime of learning.

To support parents as their children's first teachers and to provide all families with early learning and care choices that enable them to better balance family, work and education commitments.

To build stronger, healthy and inclusive early learning and care communities which bring children and families together at a local level.



What Will Inform Our Work? The Guiding Principles for Early Learning and Care

All of our children deserve the best start in life that we can give them. They all have the right to develop and grow up in environments and relationships that support and nurture them. They all benefit from opportunities to play with their peers, from stimulating experiences and from spending time in safe, caring environments.

Creating and maintaining these relationships, experiences and environments is a shared responsibility. All parents and families benefit from supports and services that help them to provide the primary care their children need.

Albertans place a high value on early learning and care for all children. They consider it important that all families have access to high quality, affordable early learning and care that meets child and family needs.

Research emphasizes the importance of ensuring that early learning and care is of a high quality and that it draws on evidence-based practice. High quality early learning and care fosters young children's learning across the full range of their expanding creative, emotional, social, intellectual and physical capacities. It recognizes that while all children benefit from early learning and care, no two children or the families in which they live are the same. It responds to the differing circumstances, social, cultural and geographic characteristics of individual children, families and communities. And it engages children, families and communities in the collective support of early learning and care.

Consistent with these understandings, four broad principles will guide the design, funding and delivery of early learning and care in Alberta.

Early learning and care is a shared responsibility

Governments, school boards, community organizations, parents and children all have vital roles to play in shaping early learning and care. Partnerships between government, communities, service providers and families provide the foundation for effective early learning and care.

Early learning and care is accessible and responsive to child and family needs

All families deserve access to high quality early learning and care in their home communities which meets the needs of children with differing abilities, from different cultural, linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Early learning and care values diversity and supports the full-inclusion of all children.

Families benefit from choices in the early learning and care available to them – with services available and accessible to all of the families that need them.

Early learning and care is of a high quality and evidence-based

High quality early learning and care supports the emotional, social, cognitive and physical development of young children. It provides safe, nurturing environments that reflect research and best practice, places an emphasis on strong relationships that support children's learning through play and builds connections between a child's learning and development inside and outside of the home.

Early learning and care is accountable

Early learning and care services and programs reflect the vision, goals and principles set out for early learning and care in Alberta. They uphold and meet the standards of practice, achieve the outcomes set out for services and report on their activities and outcomes to the families, communities and governments that form their collaborative partners in service delivery.

Early learning and care services strive to reach the best possible outcomes for children and their families and actively involve them in achieving these outcomes.

Building an Early Learning and Care System – Public Planning, Management and Oversight



Alberta’s early learning and care services have developed over time under the jurisdiction of two main ministries – Human Services and Education. Separate pieces of legislation, and supporting regulations, shape both the services and their models of delivery.

Early Childhood Services, through the Ministry of Education, are offered at no-cost to families, with all children entitled to attend publicly funded half-day kindergarten. Children with special needs are eligible for up to three years of support prior to entering the school system.

Child care services, family day homes and preschools, are the responsibility of the Ministry of Human Services which sets the standards for licensed and regulated services. The Ministry provides some funding to support the delivery of child care and family day home services and to reduce the costs of service for lower income families. Parents and families purchase these services directly from service providers.

The move toward a more integrated early learning and care system requires a coordinated cross-ministerial approach to the oversight, management and planning of services. Local regions need appropriate structures to plan and guide service delivery at the community level that meet the needs of children and families. Parents and families need opportunities to inform how services operate.

Two key initiatives are proposed to support the move toward the more integrated public management and planning of early learning and care.



A New Ministerial Partnership Between the Ministries of Education, Human Services and Health - The Alberta Early Learning and Care Initiative

The ministries of Human Services and Education will continue to share provincial responsibility for early learning and care. Together, in conjunction with the Ministry of Health, they will form a new cross-ministerial partnership that supports the following activities:

- a coordinated long-term strategy for the expansion of early learning and care services;
- collaborative planning for the support of service delivery at the community level;
- support for the development and implementation of strategies and initiatives that more closely integrate services at the community level;
- the collection and reporting of service delivery and outcome data at a provincial level.

The Alberta Early Learning and Care Initiative will form one part of a larger Early Childhood Development Strategy which sees the three ministries working together to advance child and family well-being.

The Development and Implementation of Regional Early Learning and Care Boards

The three Ministries will work together to design and implement a new regional early learning and care board structure. These new regional boards will be mandated (and funded) to plan, manage and oversee the delivery of early learning and care at a regional level.

These new boards will oversee early learning and care services in both school and community settings (kindergarten programs will remain under the jurisdiction of school boards). They will develop and implement regional plans that guide the expansion and integration of services in ways that are both consistent with provincial guidelines and responsive to regional service needs and priorities.

At minimum, the boards will include representatives from local school boards as well as from Child and Family Service Authorities. The boards will also include parents and family members, ensuring that local community voices are represented and heard, as well as local municipal representatives.

Board members will be appointed by the Ministers of Education and Human Services based on stakeholder and community input. The geographic boundaries for the regions require discussion. One option is to align them with current school board boundaries.

How We Invest in Early Learning and Care - Financing an Integrated Early Learning and Care System



The financing of early learning and care shapes both the services and their delivery. Different jurisdictions approach the financing of early learning and care in different ways. These approaches reflect the goals they establish for early learning and care, the outcomes they anticipate it will achieve, as well as the principles they use to guide services and their delivery.

In Alberta, Early Childhood Services delivered under the authority of the Ministry of Education are publicly funded while community-based early learning and care delivered under the authority of the Ministry of Human Services is privately purchased by parents and families with some public funding support. More closely integrating early learning and care requires a rethinking and reconciliation of these two different financing models.

The financing for early learning and care must strike an appropriate balance between public and private sources. All governments must ensure that the public resources they invest are allocated in the most effective ways to meet policy priorities and goals. Parents and families have differing resources available to them to support their children's early learning and care. For some even modest service costs present a barrier to access.

Early learning and care services that are under-financed, or which operate with some degree of financial fragility, are often modest in quality and may not support positive outcomes for children or their families. High quality early learning and care requires a significant investment no matter how this investment is shared between public and private sources.

Four strategies are proposed to support the move toward a more sustainable, integrated financing model for early learning and care.

Increased Public Investments Over an Initial Ten Year Period

The closer integration of early learning and care requires a significant increase in the level of public investment particularly in programs and services for children below kindergarten age. This increased investment will need to be phased in incrementally as part of a longer term, 10 year investment strategy that improves families' access to high quality early learning and care.

The increased level of public investment will be determined as a matter of public policy with a commitment to long-term stable, public funding.

Stable, Sustained Operational Support for Service Delivery

Stable, sustained operational support in the form of service contracts with approved service providers appears most likely to support high quality, affordable and accessible services. This funding model will more closely align the strategies used to support services under the jurisdiction of the Ministries of Education and Human Services.

Eligible service providers will receive base operational funding, through a vehicle such as service contracts, that reflects the number of children and families they serve. This funding will also take into account regional variations in service costs. Eligible service providers will be required to meet all provincial service standards and guidelines to receive operational support.

Additional funding will be available for services which provide early learning and care for children with a high level of special needs as well as those which serve children who face other defined barriers or challenges. This funding will blend with base program funding to ensure that all service providers have the capacity to serve children and families with special needs.

Operational funding support will not cover the full-costs of service for all children below kindergarten age. Families will be required to cover a portion of service costs in the form of fees, although these fees will be publicly managed to ensure services remain affordable.

Management of Early Learning and Care Costs for Families

To ensure that public funding supports high quality services that are accessible and affordable for all families, the provincial ministries will work with the newly established Regional Early Learning and Care Boards to develop regional fee guidelines.

Regional Boards will seek input from local early learning and care stakeholders to determine the maximum fees that parents can be charged, depending on the type of early learning and care. Families will continue to have access to kindergarten that is fully publicly funded.

The Regional Boards will also receive provincial resources to provide subsidy funding for eligible families with very low household incomes.

Public Accountability, Monitoring and Reporting

Service providers who receive public funding will report annually to the proposed new Regional Boards on the allocation and use of these monies. At minimum, they will report on how their services meet agreed measures and outcomes and how they contribute to and achieve regional and provincial early learning and care goals.



How We Deliver Early Learning and Care – Integrating Early Learning and Care Programs and Services at the Community Level

The move toward a more integrated early learning and care system that provides all families with equitable access to high quality early learning and care in their local community will require both an expansion of services and their closer integration at both a provincial and regional level.

At present, early learning and care for children below kindergarten age is delivered through community organizations, private businesses as well as school boards. Most of these organizations and businesses are small, independent entities; although there are some larger ones that provide a range of services in a number of different communities (e.g. The YMCA).

The capacity of many of these smaller organizations and businesses to expand their services is limited. This is especially the case in communities where service costs are high, where there are less well-developed community and private sectors and where families have lower household incomes. The result is a variation in the distribution and quality of services both within and between different regions of the province, with families often finding it difficult to access services.

Even within communities with a greater complement of services there are often only limited connections between individual services. Centre-based child cares are not linked with family day home and preschools, and these in turn are largely disconnected from school-based, kindergarten and ECS programs. As a result, families must navigate their way through a fragmented service landscape and commonly face challenges as their children transition between services.

A new early learning and care system for Alberta will support a planned expansion and closer integration of services over time building on the strengths of school-based

services with the innovation and flexibility of community service delivery models. It will seek to bring new public partners to the table; to expand the potential roles that schools play in early learning and care; and to build on the strong, community-based services already in place. It will ensure that high quality, community-based programs are sustainable and have the opportunity to grow and develop.

At the community level, services will work more closely together to achieve the collective goals identified for early learning and care. Families will have greater choice in the types of service they access, and children will have the opportunity to make smoother transitions between different services.

Three strategies are proposed to expand and more closely integrate early learning and care at the community level.

The Development and Support of Local Early Learning and Care Service Networks

The new Regional Early Learning and Care Boards will work with service providers to establish and support geographically defined community-based early learning and care service networks.

These networks will comprise a range of early learning and care services (e.g. centre-based child care, family day homes and preschools). Existing service providers who join the network will work together to form a local service continuum that better meets the needs of children and families.

As part of a local network, service providers will share resources, use a single-point of entry to help parents access services, and link their play-based early learning programs through shared service initiatives. The network members will pursue opportunities for joint staff training and

development, and will help identify and respond to local service gaps identified in regional service plans.

Service networks will also be supported to develop working relationships with other public and community-based services that support children and their families including Parent Link Centres, and public health centres.

The programs and services that participate in a local network will receive funding through service contracts with the Regional Early Learning and Care Board that support their more integrated approach to service delivery.

The new Regional Early Learning and Care Boards will work with local service providers to determine the appropriate management and oversight structures required to support the effective operation of local service networks. School Boards and Municipalities will be eligible to serve as network managers and administrators as will local early learning and care organizations which have a strong community presence and connection.

The service providers that comprise a local network will meet all provincial licencing requirements and regulations as well as any new service guidelines (such as those relating to parent fee thresholds).

Re-engaging Municipalities in Early Learning and Care

The Ministry of Human Services will take a lead role in working with the new Regional Early Learning and Care Boards to re-engage municipalities in the delivery and support of early learning and care for children below kindergarten age. Through agreements similar to those in place as part of the Family and Community Support Services Program, the Ministry will enter into partnerships with interested municipalities to introduce or expand early learning and care services.

Municipalities will manage and or deliver early learning and care services that operate in accordance with provincial guidelines and regulations. The Ministry will provide annual grant funding support to the municipality (based on the number and type of early learning spaces under municipal management/delivery) as well as capital funding for the development of early learning and care spaces.

In the initial phase, the Ministry will focus on developing partnerships with those municipalities in which existing services are least able to meet community needs.

The Closer Integration of Early Childhood Services and Community-based Services

Kindergarten and other ECS programs in school-based settings will become more closely linked with community-based services. Schools with pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs will be encouraged to join the new local early learning and care networks.

The new Regional Boards will consider schools and school boards as one of the preferred partners for the development and implementation of new early learning and care services that emerge through the stream-lining of current regulations (for example, those for preschools and ECS approved programs) as well as the expansion of existing service models (e.g. centre-based child care). Schools will either deliver these services directly or through partnerships with approved community-based organizations. Locally, the expansion and operation of new school supported programs will align with the service priorities identified in the regional plans prepared by the new Regional Early Learning and Care Boards.

To help support this new larger role for school boards and schools, the Ministry of Education will work to ensure that all new school construction includes dedicated space for early learning and care. School Boards will further be eligible for capital funding to support the use of existing surplus space for early learning and care. School utilization rate formulas will be amended to include approved early learning and care as an educational use of school space.

Non-participating Service Providers

Service providers who decide not to join local service networks will continue to operate in accordance with provincial licensing standards and regulations. They may further be exempt from some new service guidelines (for example regional fee thresholds).

Non-participating service providers will not be eligible, however, for new funding supports associated with the move toward a more closely integrated system of early learning and care.

Investing in Early Childhood Educators - Building an Early Learning and Care Workforce

The move toward an Alberta early learning and care system requires new investments in a well-educated, respected and professional early learning and care workforce.

High quality early learning and care begins with a caring early childhood educator who has the ability to build relationships with children that stimulate, nurture and support their learning. Qualified, caring early childhood educators help to create the safe, rich and rewarding environments in which children thrive and in which families are supported and valued as their children's first teachers.

The early learning and care workforce comprises many different staff who work with young children in both community- and school-based settings: including early childhood educators, family child care providers, kindergarten teachers and centre directors. Each of these staff benefits from specific early childhood education and ongoing professional development. Together formal educational preparation and ongoing professional development can help these staff respond to children's curiosity, and enable them to support children's exploration and problem-solving in safe, stimulating environments.

At present, much of the early learning and care workforce, particularly outside of school-based programs and services, has modest formal education, limited access to ongoing professional development and relatively low rates of remuneration. By comparison, staff in school-based programs has higher levels of formal education (although not always in early childhood education), have access to

ongoing professional development and enjoy competitive salaries and benefits.

A longer term strategy is required to build the capacity of Alberta's early learning and care workforce. Three initial starting points are outlined below that will require new investments and new partnerships to help advance the field. The timelines for the implementation of each will need to be determined through discussions between the Ministries and the early learning and care field.

New Education Requirements and Opportunities for Early Childhood Educators

Over an agreed time frame, a two year early childhood education and care diploma will become the minimum level of formal education required for all early childhood educators that work in licensed or approved settings.

Existing staff who do not meet this new educational requirement will have opportunities to upgrade their education while they continue to work. The Ministries of Human Services and Education will work with post-secondary institutions to establish education programs that are accessible to current staff.

The Ministries of Education and Human Services will also work with eligible post-secondary institutions to support the development of new Bachelor degrees focused on pedagogy and leadership. These new degrees will reflect the emerging complexity of the field and will help prepare early childhood educators to assume leadership roles in practice in the field.

Finally, the two Ministries will work with post-secondary institutions to explore options for the development of new post-diploma programs that focus specifically on aspects of service management and leadership.

Professional Development and Ongoing Certification Requirements for Early Childhood Educators

The Ministries of Human Services and Education, with the support of the Ministry of Health, will work with the Alberta Child Care Association (ACCA), the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement (ARCQE), and the Alberta Teacher's Association (ATA) to develop new professional development training opportunities for staff that work with children below the mandatory school age. Where appropriate, ACCA, ARCQE and ATA will look at options for joint professional development opportunities that help to create a shared early learning and care discipline.

Early childhood educators will, over time, be required to complete ongoing professional development as part of their professional certification. Similarly, certified teachers that work with children below the mandatory school age will be required, over time, to complete professional development requirements with an early childhood education and care focus.

Provincial Salary Guidelines for Early Childhood Educators

The recruitment and retention of early childhood educators with higher levels of formal education will require increases in staff wages and benefits, as well as the emergence of possible career paths in the early childhood education field.

The Ministries of Human Services, Education and Health will work with the early learning and care field to determine how best, over time, to introduce provincial early childhood educator salary and benefit guidelines for all staff in employee positions in licensed and approved programs.

These guidelines will need to reflect the professional preparation requirements to work in the field as well as the specific work responsibilities.



Supporting Children’s Early Learning – An Alberta Early Learning and Care Curriculum Framework

The early years are a time of rapid and foundational growth for young children. All children have a natural curiosity and interest in their emerging worlds. They seek to interact with their environments, their caregivers and other children as they learn and grow through relationships and experiences that nurture and stimulate them.

Research on children’s early learning provides an image of the young child as an active, capable early learner who benefits from a range of rich, stimulating experiences with caring adults in environments that are safe and supportive. And while children differ in their strengths and capabilities they have much in common in how they develop and learn.

The young child’s exploration of her world through play in stimulating environments, with adults and other children, provides her with the opportunities she needs to grow and develop. Skilled and caring early childhood educators with a strong knowledge of how children learn can, with appropriate resources, support this learning.

The development and implementation of early learning and care curriculum frameworks recognizes the complex and dynamic nature of children’s early learning. These frameworks draw on a strong vision of the child as an active, engaged learner with a unique social, cultural and linguistic heritage that is grounded in the families and communities in which she lives.

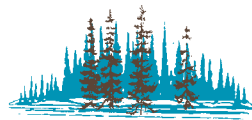
Work on an Alberta early learning and care curriculum framework is underway with the support of the Ministries of Education and Human Services. Given the potential value of an Alberta early learning and care curriculum framework to support children’s early learning across a range of services and programs, the following strategy is proposed.

The Implementation of an Alberta Early Learning and Care Curriculum Framework to Guide and Support Early Childhood Education and Care Practice

The Ministries of Human Services and Education with support from the Ministry of Health will work with community partners to develop and implement an Alberta Early Learning and Care Framework for use by early childhood educators across all licensed and regulated early learning programs.

The Alberta Early Learning and Care Curriculum Framework will outline in broad terms the vision, principles and areas for early learning and care in Alberta. The Framework will be developed to support practice in the broad range of early learning and care programs and services.

The Ministries will work in partnership with early learning and care stakeholders (including early childhood educators and teachers) to support the implementation of the Framework in early learning and care programs and services across the province that serve children below the mandatory school age and their families.



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