

Learning From Each Other: Early Learning and Child care Experiences in Canadian Cities

The first national study of local children's programs (child care, kindergarten, recreation) in 11 Canadian cities (St. John's, Halifax, Montreal, Sherbrooke, Toronto, Sudbury, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Calgary, Vancouver and Whitehorse)

Summary of Findings:

- (1) None of the cities in the study have sufficient service coverage for children ages 0-12, with the exception of kindergarten provision, which is universal and in three provinces, compulsory.
- (2) Child care, the piece of ELCC with the least local control, is particularly problematic. Montreal, in the province with the most extensive provision, has child care for just under 45% of children aged 0-12. Most of the other cities cluster in the 10-16% range, with the exception of Saskatoon with child care available to 6.9% of children. Toronto has over 50,000 licensed child care spaces. However, its large child population of 378,925 means that it has enough spaces for only 13.6% of 0-12 year-olds.
- (3) It is apparent that the current poor and inconsistent levels of service in communities across Canada will continue if the federal government implements its current plan to cancel the funding negotiated through the 2005 federal-provincial bilateral ELCC agreements to create and operate new child care spaces.
- (4) Municipalities hold the key to recreation programs that play an important, if de facto, role in providing out of school hours care.
- (5) Full day kindergarten for five-year-olds is the norm in Halifax, Sherbrooke and Montreal as well as in the French-language school boards in Toronto, Sudbury and Calgary.. It is otherwise available on a limited basis in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Calgary and Whitehorse. Forty-six Vancouver schools have full-day K. Otherwise, half-day kindergarten for five-year olds is available across Canada. Half-day kindergarten for four year-olds exists across Ontario and therefore, in Toronto and Sudbury. It is available on a limited basis, usually for children "at risk" in most of the other cities.
- (5) In a number of cities, local schools are a popular site for existing or proposed integrated children's service hubs. The facilities are purpose-built for children and encourage integration between the two main programs for children under six – child care and kindergarten. Schools are also sites of important recreation facilities, which can be used for summer programmes for 6-12 year olds.
- (6) Local/regional planning capacity is essential to ensure equitable development of services across cities. The situation where the communities with the greatest social capital obtain the most resources is far too common. While community consultation in the creation of services is important, a bottom-up exercise is insufficient on its own. Proactive central planning is required if age and class-geographical inequalities are to be addressed. Municipalities, as elected governments, have an essential role to play here.

- (7) Adequate, stable levels of funding are essential. As the Toronto and Vancouver stories show, even with a strong vision, a clear plan and a well-developed local infrastructure, inequities will arise as long as there is insufficient funding to provide a place for all who want and need it.
- (8) The limited municipal property tax base will not sustain the cost of initiating and maintaining a broadly-accessible ELCC program and the research shows that purely local solutions do not result in equitable access to services. Municipalities now fund large parts of recreation and could expand in this area. School boards can continue to enhance ELCC through kindergarten and other supports to school-based child care. Ultimately, the building of a strong web of ELCC services may mean integrating funding as well as services.
- (9) Service integration, following the hub or other designs, is important and is most effective when supported by a strong vision, shared by all, and organisational and fiscal mechanisms that create a plus-sum game.
- (10) ELCC “Hubs”, organised around non-profit child care centres and responsible to elected boards composed of users and community representatives, can respond to community needs. Hubs have the capacity to integrate many types of children’s services, including child care, parent supports, recreation and other services such as those provided by public health and libraries. Integrated service hubs build in transitions as children move throughout the day and as they grow and develop over time. They can also provide a unified point of access when parents are looking for services. To succeed, they need stable and adequate funding and a lead organisation with the administrative support needed to play a coordinating role.
- (11) A number of local initiatives have been shown to work and the most successful have these features in common:
 - they are created for all children and not targeted to special populations;
 - they allow for local flexibility and local accountability;
 - there is ongoing commitment from all partners and the support of a cross-cutting form of organization established in the community sector, by the province, or by the municipality.

For more information:

Carol Ann Young, Social Planner
City of Vancouver
carol.ann.young@vancouver.ca
604-871-6042