

A Comprehensive System of High Quality Child Care for Nova Scotia

by E. Elaine Ferguson, M Ed.

The child care delivery system in Nova Scotia is in crisis. Programs have been closing and others are hanging on by a thread. Nova Scotia lacks a comprehensive system for the provision of accessible, affordable, regulated high quality child care, and by failing to take action on this issue, significant burdens are imposed on employers, parents, children and the child care sector

Employers pay a steep price for the lack of a comprehensive system of child care. Accessible, affordable, regulated child care is an essential service. The lack of it forces many parents out of the labour market entirely. With them, go vital skills and talents. This reduces the pool of qualified workers available to Nova Scotia’s industries and businesses, and places an unnecessary burden on the province’s social safety net.

Even *parents* who can afford to pay for high quality regulated child care have trouble getting it. According to a report from the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, in 2003 there were 65,000 children under the age of six in Nova Scotia, 70% of whom (about 45,300 children) had mothers in the paid work force¹. The number of regulated child care spaces in the entire province, including full-day and part-day programs, is 12,194 which would accommodate 27% of the children of working mothers.

Cost can also be a barrier. Around the province, the cost of child care averages \$20.00 to \$28.00 per day, per child, for full-time care. The average income of a Nova Scotia family is \$46,523.00². This means the average Nova Scotia family with one child in full-time care must spend between 11% and 15% of its total

household income on child care. All parents are feeling the crunch, but lower-income families are hardest hit by the rising costs of care.

Children are the group most affected by Nova Scotia’s lack of a comprehensive child care system. Studies show that high quality child care reduces school drop-out rates and the incidence of school failure; reduces the need to admit children into special education programs; lowers juvenile delinquency rates; and increases the detection and treatment of health problems³. There is reason to believe that investments in regulated, high quality child care more than pay for themselves by the time a child reaches adulthood and there is absolutely no question that quality child care helps children become healthy, well-adjusted adults. Doesn’t every child born in our province deserve the advantages of a healthy start in life?

It is important to recognize that helping children grow into healthy, well-adjusted adults is a responsibility shared by all *citizens* of Nova Scotia. Our acceptance of this responsibility is part of what makes us Canadian. It is how we acknowledge that care and compassion aren’t optional—they are the lifeblood of our society.

The Needs of the Child Care Sector

In a recent cross-province consultation by Child Care Connection, the *child care sector* identified the need for a comprehensive infrastructure that supports quality child care, its implementation being a partnership between the sector and government.

1 Nova Scotia’s Early Childhood Development Initiative: Annual Report April 2003. Nova Scotia Community Services. Halifax, 2003.

2 Statistics Canada 2000.

3 Canadian Child Care Federation (1999) *Partners in Quality*; Cleveland and Krashinski (1998) *The Benefits and Costs of Good Child Care*; Doherty (1998) *Zero to Six: The Basis for School Readiness*. Human Resource Development Canada; Connor and Brink (1999) *Understanding the Early Years: Community Impacts on Child Development*. Human Resource Development Canada; and Kyle (1999) *Why is Quality Important?* Canadian Child Care Federation.

Priorities identified to address this need were:

- Developing a Strong Professional Infrastructure.
- Retention and recruitment- without enough qualified staff, programs are unable to provide high quality care to children.
- Building relationships and working together within the sector- as we develop our professional organizations, implement standards of practice, apply a code of ethics, and work successfully on various projects, the sector will become more accountable and responsible for high quality care;
- Increased and sustained government support;
- Increasing awareness of the value of child care within and outside the sector.

What the system would look like

Policy framework

Canadian society has undergone a profound change in recent years, a change that has prompted public officials to pledge their commitment to increasing positive outcomes for children 0-6 and a public policy framework that supports good outcomes for children now exists.

Under the umbrella of the National Children's Agenda⁴ and following the basic parameters for improving social programs described in the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA), Canada's First Ministers committed to the Early Childhood Development Initiative⁵ (ECDI, 2000), which pledged funding to strengthen early childhood development, learning and care. Building on this commitment, the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers Responsible for Social Services agreed to make additional investments in the specific area of early learning and child care. This was based on the recognition that "quality early learning and child care programs play an important role in promoting the social, emotional, physical and cognitive development of young children".⁶ The Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child

Care⁷ (ELCC) provides the framework for increased funding specifically for "provincially/territorially regulated early learning and child care programs".

Regulation

Two types of regulation are important to ensuring the quality of the care provided, government regulation and sector self-regulation.

- Government regulation is necessary to ensure that children are safe from harm.
- Sector self-regulation supported by government is necessary to ensure that each child receives a level of care and early education that optimizes his or her developmental potential.

Licensing regulations (legal requirements in order to be licensed to provide child care) help reduce or eliminate three broad areas of risk that threaten children's health and well-being while they attend child care programs:

- safety hazards related to the physical plant and program activities (e.g. fires, building hazards, strangulation related to improper precautions, insufficient staffing and inadequate supervision);
- health hazards related to the spread of infectious diseases and environmental risks (e.g. food preparation, body waste handling, medication errors etc.); and
- developmental impairment hazards (e.g. failure to provide for growth and well being in the basic spheres of development, under-stimulation etc.).^{8,9}

A comprehensive system of high quality child care defines the role of the licensing professional as involving more than just enforcement of basic safety and hygiene rules that protect children from harm. In this system, the licensing professional works with each licensee to optimize the quality of care offered and developmental outcomes achieved in the program or facility. Rather than simply monitoring for

4 < http://socialunion.gc.ca/nca_e.html>

5 < <http://www.hrhc-drfc.gc.ca/common/wnew/document/ecdback.shtml>>

6 Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Child Care. Signed March 13,2003.

7 http://socialunion.gc.ca/ecd-framework_e.htm

8 Stevens, Carolynne.(1996). *Regulating Human Care and Service Programs: Study Guides for Citizens and Advocates Part I: Identifying Agendas*, NARA.

9 Morgan, Gwen. (1996). *Regulation and the Prevention of Harm*, Boston: Centre for Career Development and Education.

compliance, the licensing professional's role is to facilitate ongoing quality improvements for individual programs, by providing consultation, access to resources and other supports for child care practitioners. Under such a system, licensees are encouraged and supported by the licensing professional to exceed basic compliance standards, hereby creating a system that makes it possible for adequate centres to become good centres, and good centres to become excellent centres.

A government and child care sector partnership

A comprehensive system of high quality child care encourages and supports sector-driven initiatives that facilitate excellence and professionalism among child care practitioners and within child care programs. In such a system, the child care sector develops standards of practice, which are promoted and supported through endorsement and accreditation by professional associations and affiliate groups such as the Canadian Child Care Federation, as well as by post secondary early education and care programs.

As a signatory to the National Children's Agenda, Social Union Framework Agreement, Early Childhood Development Agreement and Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care, the government of Nova Scotia has committed to improving early childhood outcomes. It has formally recognized the lead role it's regulated child care programs play in this regard. Nova Scotia's child care sector is committed to ensuring that the government of Nova Scotia is able to meet these stated commitments. But, the sector can't do it alone.

A comprehensive system of high quality child care requires five things from governments. They are:

- the provision of clear regulations,
- periodic review of these regulations,
- support and training for licensing professionals,
- dedicated funding to licensees, child care associations and post secondary early education and care programs, and

- a willingness to work in partnership with stakeholders in regulated child care (licensing professionals; child care practitioners both as individuals and working together as a sector, and post secondary early childhood care and education programs) to facilitate positive human development outcomes.

The needs of society and the needs of the child care sector are not in competition. A balance must be struck between these two sets of needs when developing plans to most effectively utilize child care dollars. This balance is essential for a plan to be effective in supporting and sustaining a comprehensive system that supports both society in its child care needs and the child care sector in what they need to provide high quality child care.

A comprehensive system of available, affordable, high quality child care is essential to Nova Scotia's social and economic well being. It would improve our quality of life now, and would lead to fewer demands on the health, social welfare and criminal justice systems in the future¹⁰. Nova Scotia can only benefit from investing in the development of healthy, positive citizens, who have the potential for innovation, creativity, communication and contribution¹¹. As citizens we cannot settle for less.

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This article is a summary of a paper used by Child Care Connections in its Caring At Work Campaign. Presentations have been made to a variety of Policy Influencers and Makers and Colleagues in the child care sector to enlist their support in advancing a comprehensive infrastructure to support quality child care in Nova Scotia. The detailed paper is available in pdf format by contacting Connections.

¹⁰ Coffey, C., McCain, M. N., (2002). Commission on Early Learning and Child Care for the City of Toronto: Final Report May 2002.

¹¹ Coffey, C., McCain, M. N., (2002). Commission on Early Learning and Child Care for the City of Toronto: Final Report May 2002.

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