

Submission to Building a Better Future

Inclusive Early Childhood Service System Project

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Dear Minister Naidoo-Harris:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to "Building a Better Future". We appreciate that the province is continuing to engage in the development and transformation of the early years and child care.

Our response to the discussion paper is informed by our work in the School of Early Childhood Studies at Ryerson University, and as the Principal Investigator on the Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project (IECSS). The IECSS project seeks to understand the institutional practices of early childhood. Our perspective comes from longitudinal and comprehensive study of qualitative data of families' experiences with early childhood education, care and intervention services in 5 geographic communities in Ontario. The project is funded by SSHRC, and the CMSMs and DSAABs, who are responsible for ensuring that special needs resourcing in their communities is effective and of high quality. Namely, the County of Wellington, the City of Hamilton, District of Timiskaming, and the City of Toronto. In addition, we have multiple Indigenous organizations who are partnered with the project in order to specifically examine the experiences of Indigenous families across these services.

It was with great anticipation that we read the Discussion paper for Transforming Early Years and Child Care in Ontario. We believe that a comprehensive *strategy* at the systems level is long overdue. Based on the findings from the IECSS project, we put forward the following 5 recommendations:

- 1) **Transformation of the early years system must be defined through the lens of children and families, not by funding envelopes or current service delivery systems.** For example, each community in this study is made up of diverse families, and each family has unique circumstances. However, the funding envelopes do not allow communities to design their budget for the families who are part of their community.

Some of the communities where families in our study live have extraordinarily high rates of disability and the CMSM/DSSABs must be able to develop appropriate budgets for their community. We must also ensure that it is the documented experiences of families in the community driving the planning.

- 2) **Ensure that access is considered across the full spectrum of the early years;** this means that child care and family supports as well as many other direct services families with children with disabilities and special needs access under the special needs strategy must be considered at the same time as child care. For example, while you intend to increase child care spaces under your plan, 60% of families will not have child care. There must be a plan in place for those families which includes services outside of child care.

- 3) **Quality needs to be synonymous with inclusive practice.** Ample research demonstrates that meaningful inclusive services have the characteristics that make services high quality for all children.
- 4) As normative understandings of development are discriminatory, **difference and diversity need to be stated as the norm, and equity to be a central rather than a peripheral concern for social policy.** This is in keeping with the Ministry's document *How Does Learning Happen?*
- 5) **Child care, Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centres, and Resource Consultation need to be a collective and central part of early childhood education, care and intervention.** This means that they should all be working together with the understanding that many families are using all three. As CMSMs and DSAABs are now in the position of dictating how they will plan individual programs (child care, speech and language, autism supports, children's mental health, family support) they need the authority to make resource decisions that will allow them to support all families in a true system of services.

Attached, you will find a series of policy briefs that have been written collaboratively with members of the IECSS team. These policy briefs provide some of the rational for these recommendations.

Through our research of family experiences, we have identified why it is critical that the province and service providers embrace a systems view of disability services, if we are to achieve an agenda for inclusion of all children and their families in Ontario schools and communities. The findings from the study have implications for multiple social policy initiatives including: "Building a Better Future", the Special Needs Strategy, and planning for Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centres. Our study makes a case for why designing policy and service delivery from the experiences of families of children with disabilities at the systems level is critical for better quality services for all children and families.

The project team would be very happy to meet and discuss our findings and the implications for creating a more inclusive Ontario.

Sincerely,



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