

Toward a Provincial Framework for Early Learning and Care in Alberta

What We Heard: A Report on Fall 2012 Consultations with Early Learning and Care Stakeholders



Prepared for the Government of Alberta Ministries of Education and Human Services



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1.

Introduction

In fall 2012, the Muttart Foundation, Success By 6 and Calgary UpStart, hosted seven regional consultations with early learning and care stakeholders with funding support from the Government of Alberta ministries of Human Services and Education. The regional consultations considered the design of a potential new provincial framework for the funding and delivery of early learning and care, building on an initial series of meetings the partners sponsored in 2010 and 2011.

The following report, prepared for the Government of Alberta Ministries of Human Services and Education, highlights the major themes and findings from the fall 2012 regional consultations. It outlines the main ideas, advice and directions that early learning and care stakeholders offered in regard to a framework and serves as a useful starting point for moving toward a more integrated and comprehensive approach to the funding and delivery of early learning and care in Alberta.

The growing body of research that highlights the importance of the early years as a key phase for child and family well-being has raised the profile of early learning and care and increased the public and private attention focussed upon it. The recognition that effective early childhood education and care practice is linked to strong family policy makes the current context for the discussion of early learning and care in Alberta, as one dimension of a broader new social policy framework, an ideal place to begin the significant work that lies ahead.

2. The Consultation Process

Between November 5th and November 22nd, The Muttart Foundation, Success By 6 and Calgary UpStart hosted seven regional consultations with early learning and care stakeholders to consider the design and content of a new provincial framework for early learning and care in Alberta. The consultations, held in 7 major centres (Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray), were attended by 220 invited stakeholders.

The stakeholders who attended the consultations included senior staff and volunteers from early learning and child care organizations, senior staff who work with children below the mandatory school age in school-based early learning programs, academic staff from post-secondary institutions with interests in early learning and child care, as well staff from infrastructure and regional organizations that support the delivery of services.

The stakeholders were invited to attend the meetings based on their knowledge and experience in the funding and delivery of early learning and care. They were asked to provide their own insights and perspectives on what a provincial framework for early learning and care might look like, and what it would need to consider and include to advance early learning and care in Alberta.

In support of the discussions, the project partners, the Muttart Foundation, Success By 6 and Calgary UpStart, contracted a team of early education and care researchers to prepare three background discussion papers. These were circulated to the invited stakeholders in advance of the forums. The background papers introduced the proposed work, provided an overview of the idea of integrating early learning and care and explored, in more detail, the potential elements or features of a new provincial framework for early learning and care in Alberta.

The papers were developed to help frame the discussions and to provide the participants with some common starting points for their consideration. While the individual papers summarized the research findings, provided examples of practice from other jurisdictions, and included ideas for consideration they did not make recommendations on what an Alberta framework should include by way of content.

The seven regional consultations followed a similar format. At each, the participants engaged in a series of facilitated discussions that considered the larger idea of integrating early learning and care, the overarching goals and purposes for early learning and care and the specific guidelines or directions that a provincial framework might include in respect to the governance, financing, and delivery of services. The discussions around service delivery explored three related elements: the organization of services; the early learning and care workforce and the idea of a common curriculum framework to guide practice.

Participants were also asked to look to the future of early learning and care in the province and to indicate their level of support for changes in how it is governed, funded and delivered.

At the conclusion of the consultation process, the project partners prepared a detailed consultation report for each of the seven meetings. It is these reports that form the basis for the current final report.

3.

The Consultation Discussion Themes, Ideas and Main Arguments

The following sections present the themes and ideas that emerged from the seven regional discussions. Where feasible the main points of consensus are brought forward as are those of significant difference or departure. Similarly, any significant regional differences in the ideas or arguments participants presented are highlighted.

3.1 Integrating Early Learning and Care

The discussions of more closely integrating early learning and care in Alberta explored participant views on both the level or type of integration most likely to improve services for children and their families, as well as the readiness of stakeholders to support and work towards greater integration. Participants further reflected on the key considerations that would need to be taken into account in more closely integrating services.

Participants supported the idea of more closely integrating early learning and care services while raising some questions around what should be integrated and how the process of the change would take place. Participants questioned, for example, how the different voices of education and community services would be equally heard in more closely integrating early learning and care. They commented on the need to ensure that local services remain

responsive to local needs, and that closer integration takes into account the differences between service delivery in rural and urban environments. They saw the need to work towards a greater consistency of services both within and across regions while accommodating some local flexibility.

Participants emphasized the importance of providing parents and families with service choices and of viewing early learning and care as a support to families in a broad sense. They emphasized that services, and how they are delivered, must be child and family-centred with support for the idea of a seamless, continuum of early learning and care. They saw some challenges in reconciling the current service models given their differing public, non-profit and private business orientations and raised questions around how they might best fit within a more integrated, publicly managed system.

Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring the quality of services no matter the level or nature of integration, and raised some concerns as to whether the move toward integration might serve to heighten service inequities between different regions of the province. Participants in the Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray consultations expressed concerns that services in their communities may face additional barriers to closer integration, while also noting that some aspects of local integration are already underway.

Some participants raised concerns that new investments in early learning and care may shift the focus away from a broader emphasis on supports for children and families.

They also recognized the challenges of moving toward closer integration given the need to recruit and train new staff and to create additional early learning and care spaces at the community level.

3.1.1 The Level or Nature of Integration for Early Learning and Care in Alberta

Participants offered support for what is described in the research literature as both the ‘full’ and ‘partial’ integration of early learning and care – with a preference for the former introduced over time. In considering both scenarios, participants advised of the financial, political and cultural challenges that closer integrating brings, with some questioning whether full integration was feasible in Alberta.

Participants spoke of the need for a greater level of integration within each of the main elements or dimensions of how services are organized, funded and delivered, with some seeing integration as a vehicle to increase the access families have to high quality early learning and care. They also saw the need for integration to take place over time with some commenting on the merits of a staged or phased approach. A number of participants spoke of the importance of ensuring that services remain responsive to local community needs and able to accommodate different values and cultural traditions.

From the perspective of governance, participants saw merit, at minimum, in closer working relationships between the ministries with responsibility for early learning and care. They offered differing views on the consolidation of responsibility for early learning and care within a single ministry (even a new ministry) with a preference for a greater level of consolidation. A related sub-theme that emerged, however, was the need to include the Ministry of Health in discussions of the closer integration of early learning and care services.

Participants who commented specifically on service arrangements saw closer working relationships between local service providers as beneficial for children and their families. They emphasized the need for community-based (e.g. centre-based child care and family day homes) and school-based services (e.g. Kindergarten and pre-Kindergarten) to be treated and supported as more equal partners in the delivery of early learning and care. They raised the idea of using schools or other community sites (e.g. Parent Link Centres) as early learning and care hubs at the local level.

3.1.2 The Readiness of Stakeholders for the Closer Integration of Early Learning and Care

Participants saw the key stakeholders involved in the funding and delivery of early learning and care as, in the main, ready to move towards the closer integration of services. Some commented on possible lower levels of support for change from within the education system, and advised that some front-line staff in non-profit organizations and private businesses may not be well-informed on alternative models or approaches to early learning and care.

The larger environmental drivers of changing demographics (most notably the growing number of families with young children) as well as a greater general awareness of the importance of the early years (linked in part to work on the provincial Early Development Instrument) were seen as important factors contributing to broader community support for change. Participants also saw the work underway around a new provincial social policy framework as one indicator of the provincial government’s willingness to rethink its support for early learning and care as well as other related aspects of family policy. A minority of participants raised questions as to whether or not the ministries with jurisdiction over early learning and care are ready to consider significant change.

Participants offered differing perspectives on the readiness of parents and families to consider the closer integration of services. They noted that this readiness may vary by region and even community, with some suggesting that families in rural communities may be less ready to consider significant change.

Participants advised that while parents and families are now more aware of the importance of the early years, and motivated to consider new early learning and care models based on the challenges they face in accessing affordable care, they are likely not familiar with the larger idea or impacts of more closely integrating services. They suggested that parents would support greater integration if it improved their access to services and provided them with more choice.

Participants outside of the major centres commented on the current limited capacity of the early learning and care community to advance significant change and identified the need to build local service capacity as a key priority within any larger change process.

3.1.3 Key Considerations in Integrating Early Learning and Care

Participants at all the consultations emphasized the importance of ensuring that the interests of children and families guide the integration of early learning and care services. These interests included ensuring that services are accessible, that services are inclusive and reflect the diversity of children and their families, and that families have choices around the services they access. Some participants raised the need to support families more broadly including support for parents who do not access formal early learning and care services.

Participants spoke to the need for a clear vision for early learning and care and the need to raise stakeholder awareness of the needs of families with young children. A theme across the consultations was the need to more closely align the different models for early education and care supported through the Ministries of Education and Human Services.

Participants advised of the complex nature of advancing significant change – particularly in smaller, rural and/or northern settings given the limited service infrastructure. They noted particular challenges around developing the human resources required to support a more fully integrated system, as well as space and transportation difficulties.

The need to manage the change process was highlighted with some support for a transitional or phased process of change. Some participants saw merit in working together on some initial ‘concrete’ and ‘early’ changes that might provide the basis of a longer process of change.

Participants returned to the theme of engaging parents and families in the discussion of integrating early learning and care and advised that, since additional public investments would be required to support integration, it would be critical to develop a broad base of support for change (including those within the general population who do not use services directly).

3.2 The Goals and Purposes for Early Learning and Care

In their opening discussions on the goals and purposes for early learning and care, participants identified the need both to reach agreement on clear goals for early learning and care and to communicate these to different stakeholders. Some participants identified potential differences of opinion between the various stakeholders (e.g. government ministries, service providers and service users) on the main goals and raised questions around how these would be reconciled in a new provincial framework.

Participants offered some initial comments on the goal areas discussed in the background documents (child development/lifelong learning; family support/family well-being; community development and social cohesion; and gender and child equity). These comments are summarized below.

Participants advised that the main goal areas, once agreed upon, should inform how future services are funded and delivered. They commented on the current challenges service providers face in delivering high quality early learning and care (particularly around staffing and the cost of services for families) and spoke to the need for a continuum of services that are more universally available and accessible, with significant increases in service quality.

Some participants saw value in connecting broad goals around lifelong learning, family support, community development and equity for women and children. Consistent with this larger idea a theme across the consultations was the importance of thinking about the well-being of children and their families in broad terms.

A smaller number of participants raised the need to consider the anticipated outcomes for a system of early learning and care and how these might be captured (measured) and reported.

3.2.1 The Main Goals and Purposes for Early Learning and Care

Participants placed a primary emphasis on child development/lifelong learning and family support as the main goals for early learning and care. Both of these

larger goal areas were prominent in discussions across the province. In their discussion of child development and early learning participants emphasized that services must meet the full extent of children’s developmental needs. A number of participants commented specifically on the need for additional staff education and training to support this goal. They further emphasized that service practice should be informed by research findings.

Participants also commented on the importance of including goals around community cohesion and social inclusion with some including these as related to the broader goals around child development and family support. They emphasized the importance of ensuring that early learning and care services are accessible to all families and that they include children from different backgrounds and cultural traditions. For some participants the goal of equity for all children was specifically highlighted.

A number of participants highlighted the importance of providing families with choices in early learning and care. A lesser discussion theme was that of trying to build a greater awareness of the importance of early learning and care. They spoke of the need for more public education around the importance of early learning and care for children and their families, as well as the broader communities in which we all live.

Participants advised that political support for investments in early learning and care would need to be developed and maintained, across a range of constituencies, given the competing demands for public resources and the overall climate of fiscal restraint. A number also spoke of the value of engaging and involving families more closely in rethinking how best to advance early learning and care.

3.2.2 Anticipated Level of Agreement on Goals and Purposes

Participants advised that early learning and care stakeholders would agree, in the main, on the need for a broad set of goals that guide services. They also suggested that the need to work toward improving the quality of services would be agreed upon in broad terms.

From the standpoint of specific goals, stakeholders determined that most agreement would be found around support for lifelong learning or more generally early childhood development and child well-being. This was seen by participants as critical for all young children. Support for family well-being was also highlighted as a broad goal that stakeholders would reach agreement on; although

participants advised of some tensions in respect to this goal area. Some participants highlighted, for example, a fear that early learning and care services might be expected to take on broader family support roles that they would find difficult to fulfill.

A number of participants expressed the view that early learning and care stakeholders would agree on the importance of broad goals in the areas of community cohesion and social inclusion, with a smaller number suggesting support for goals around gender equity. On balance, participants across the consultations suggested that stakeholders would find it more difficult to reach agreement on these ‘newer’ goal areas, especially those around gender equity. They expressed the view that some stakeholders may see these as inconsistent with broader Alberta values or traditional provincial approaches to areas of policy.

In their discussions of stakeholder levels of agreement around the goals and purposes for early learning and care, participants also offered specific comments on operational aspects of service. Since these were covered separately in the meeting discussions they are summarized only briefly below.

One area that participants noted agreement on was the need to raise the quality of services – particularly in the area of human resources. By contrast, a number of participants suggested that some stakeholders would find it difficult to reach agreement on key operational areas such as who delivers services, how funding is allocated and who has overall responsibility for services. These concerns were highlighted particularly in the Lethbridge and Grande Prairie discussions.

3.3

The Integrative Elements of an Early Learning and Care System

Participants explored the main elements of a more integrated approach to early learning and care on which a new provincial framework would provide guidance and direction through a series of discussions. The background papers provided an initial overview of each of the five elements participants discussed: governance, financing, the organization of services, an early learning and care workforce, and a possible curriculum framework. For the purposes of discussion, participants considered these elements individually while recognizing the links between them.

3.3.1 The Governance of Early Learning and Care

As part of their introductory discussions of governance participants identified the following key themes, ideas and questions. They raised questions around where authority for a new early learning and care system would be vested at a ministerial level; specifically, whether responsibility would lie in a single ministry or be shared between ministries. Participants in a number of the consultations raised questions around how the Ministry of Health might be involved in the governance of services in addition to the Ministries of Education and Human Services. A number of participants saw a role for the Ministry of Health as key to a more integrated approach to service delivery.

Participants raised the idea of greater community involvement and some form of local authority over decision-making. They also spoke to the merits of a more active (and perhaps formal) parent voice in how services are delivered. The idea of a greater sense of public management underscored a number of these discussions. The future roles of private business and community non-profits in service delivery shaped the discussions in a number of the consultations, with some participants raising questions around the use of private businesses to deliver services. For others, the contribution of private for-profit businesses to the field was seen as important to continue in moving forward.

Two lesser discussion themes raised questions around the financing for early learning and care and highlighted the need to remain accountable in terms of service outcomes. Both of these were considered more fully in later discussions.

Governance Guidelines or Directions for Inclusion in a Provincial Framework

Participants offered differing perspectives on where responsibility for early learning and care services should lie at the ministerial level. They expressed support for a split in jurisdiction between ministries, the consolidation of responsibility in a single existing ministry (commonly education) as well as the creation of a new ministry with a focus on early childhood development. On balance, participants spoke more often in support of a single ministry (with some variation in the scope of this ministry's jurisdiction).

Participants saw merit in a stronger public planning/management role in support of service delivery. They identified the benefits of seeking a balance between provincial and regional management roles enabling local communities to better match services with local needs. Participants did not provide clear direction on how these regional bodies should be constituted.

Participants spoke in support of broader stakeholder engagement to help rethink the governance of early learning and care with a strong focus on engaging parents, families and other stakeholders in determining how a new system should operate and be governed. They envisioned a governance framework with well-defined roles and responsibilities and strong channels of communication between stakeholders. In terms of moving toward a new governance model, a number of participants spoke to the merits of planned, incremental change.

Anticipated Stakeholder Agreement on Governance Guidelines or Directions

Participants advised that early learning and care stakeholders would most likely agree on the need for a more systematic approach to early learning and care with greater public financial support and stronger public management with some form of local decision-making. They also saw stakeholders reaching agreement on the need for greater parent and family input into a new system design as well as its operation.

Participants advised that the early learning and care community may find it more difficult to reach agreement on how the authority for early learning and care should be

vested at a ministerial level. They further advised that some service providers (particularly private businesses) may see a more publicly managed system as a challenge to their independence and autonomy.

Some participants in the Calgary, Fort McMurray, and Grande Prairie consultations spoke to potential areas of disagreement on how to allocate any new public investments.

Key Considerations in Developing Governance Guidelines

Participants advised that time and resources would be required to support significant changes in governance. They cautioned that the incremental growth of the field, the significant differences between services, and the lack of infrastructure to support change would present challenges in moving forward too quickly.

While participants saw merit in strengthening the public management of services, as opposed to further developing a market model for services for children below the mandatory school age, they recognized that the shift to this new strategy would take time and may face opposition from some service providers.

They advised that the greater engagement of local communities in services, allied with the development and implementation of new regional or local planning bodies, would need to be appropriately resourced and planned. They further emphasized the need to provide local regions with some flexibility in how they manage and support service delivery.

A theme which cut across much of the governance discussion was that of legitimate partnerships and collaboration between the key stakeholders involved in early learning and care including government, service providers and parents/communities.

3.3.2 Financing Early Learning and Care

As part of their opening discussions of financing, participants raised the following key themes, ideas and questions. Participants emphasized the need for additional funding to support early learning and care and highlighted that this funding must be available in a sustained form. While participants commonly spoke in support of additional public investments, participants in Calgary, Fort McMurray and Lethbridge also saw opportunities for private business to support early learning and care for their employees.

Participants identified the need to present a strong case for additional investments in early learning and care particularly in terms of requests for additional public funding. A common theme across consultations was one of reconciling the current differences in the funding models in place under Education and Human Services. There were some calls to pool these funds and to distribute them more equitably to service providers. Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that services were affordable to families, with the discussions in Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray highlighting the higher cost of living in Northern and more isolated communities. Participants in Fort McMurray spoke to the key issue of affordability for parents.

Participants identified the need to appropriately cover staffing costs and emphasized the importance of ensuring that funding support the delivery of high quality services. The anticipated role of private for-profit businesses in future service delivery was considered in the Edmonton, Calgary and Red Deer consultations, with participants raising some questions around the continued delivery of services through private for-profit businesses. Participants raised further questions around the appropriate balance between the public and private costs of services, while voicing an overall preference for additional supply-side funding to support enhanced service delivery.

(Note: participants in the Medicine Hat forum did not specifically discuss the financing elements of a possible provincial framework.)

Financing Guidelines or Directions for Inclusion in a Provincial Framework

Participants commented on the need to redesign the current financing models in place. They noted the challenges service providers face in delivering high quality, affordable services and highlighted the low rates of staff remuneration as a significant challenge that must be addressed to increase service quality.

Participants saw merit in exploring new options to use the existing public funding provided more effectively. They commented on the significant differences in funding between services (particularly those supported primarily through the Ministry of Human Services and those supported through the Ministry of Education), and questioned whether existing resources could be pooled and allocated more equitably. They suggested that any new public investments be accompanied by guidelines to ensure that public monies are used to support high quality services, and that the funding provided is sustainable.

Some participants saw a more active public management role in respect to fee thresholds and staff salary guidelines as a useful strategy to address service affordability and quality. On balance, participants saw supply-side funding as a more effective financing vehicle than demand-side funding to support service delivery, with a smaller number favouring some continuation of demand-side strategies.

While participants saw the necessity for some parent fees for service, they cautioned that these must not make services unaffordable for families – especially those with lower or more modest family incomes.

Participants identified the need to take into account the additional costs of delivering high quality services in smaller centres as well as those communities with higher costs of living. These additional costs were identified particularly for communities in the northern regions of the province. Participants in the Lethbridge consultation highlighted the importance of maintaining some measure of local flexibility in allocating resources as did participants in Fort McMurray. Participants in Calgary raised the possibility of considering new innovative financing models. In Fort McMurray, participants identified the need for significant new investments in Kindergarten and pre-Kindergarten programs to meet current community needs.

Anticipated Stakeholder Agreement on Financing Guidelines or Directions

Participants advised that early learning and care stakeholders would most likely agree on the need for additional public investments in early learning and care with an emphasis on ensuring that these investments were sustainable with a focus on quality services that are affordable for all families. They saw the need for additional investments in human resources as a key area on which stakeholders could reach agreement.

While participants commented on the probable need to finance early learning and care through a combination of public and private funding they saw the determination of the appropriate mix as a potential area for disagreement – particularly among the larger general public.

They saw some potential for disagreements between service providers on how additional public monies might best be invested in different services, and cautioned that some service providers may not support financing models that seek to establish pay guidelines for staff and and/or fee thresholds for parents.

Key Considerations in Developing Financing Guidelines

Participants emphasized the need to ensure that new financing models are consistent with the agreed goals and purposes for early learning and care. They noted the challenges associated with calls for new public investments (particularly in the current fiscal climate) and highlighted the concerns that these may raise with more socially conservative stakeholder groups as well as those publics who have no direct involvement in early learning and care. Participants saw increased public education on the benefits of early learning and care, as well as a commitment to report on outcomes, as important considerations to strengthen arguments for additional public investments.

Participants advised that new public investments must be sustainable and made in the form of longer term commitments that would not fluctuate with any changes in government priorities. They also acknowledged that any change in financing models would need to take place over time and to take into account, in some measure, local needs and priorities.

Participants highlighted the need to consider the key matter of financing now given the provincial government's commitment to develop a new social policy framework for the province. They also advised that service providers would continue to face significant challenges unless or until the question of financing was resolved.

3.3.3 Organizing Early Learning and Care Service Delivery

Participants identified the organization of early learning and care services as a key area for review. They commented on the need to more closely integrate and connect services at the local or regional level. A number of participants spoke to the value of ensuring that services are more appropriately structured to meet the needs of children and their families and that families have service choices. They commented on the importance of removing the existing 'silos' in service funding and oversight and more closely integrating services at the local community level.

Participants emphasized the need for some local autonomy over the redesign of service delivery. They saw the potential to develop new community service hubs and saw value, where possible, in building on the current services in place. A number of participants saw potential roles for schools to act as service hubs. Some participants raised questions as to whether or not municipalities would be

willing to return to some role in organizing or delivering early learning and care.

Participants commented on the need to ensure that an appropriate infrastructure is in place to support more integrated service delivery. They identified staff training and education as a key area for focus and attention.

Participants in Fort McMurray and Medicine Hat identified full-day kindergarten as a starting point for expanding services. Participants in Fort McMurray raised further questions around how a new provincial framework would address unregulated services and/or provide direction on private service arrangements such as nannies.

Key Guidelines or Directions for Organizing Services

Participants expressed a high level of support for a provincial framework to include clear guidelines that support local or regional service systems or networks. These networks would establish closer linkages between services to better meet the needs of children and their families and would reflect a common vision for early learning and care.

Participants saw overall provincial guidelines that support some measure of regional management of services as consistent with the goal of building and supporting local service systems that are well-suited and responsive to local or regional service needs. They saw advantages in more fully integrating early learning and care with other services and supports for families with young children and anticipated the emergence of local service hubs.

Participants argued that dedicated funding resources would be needed to sustain and support local service networks – with specific resources allocated to infrastructure costs. They also raised again the importance of considering the human resources needed to support high quality early learning and care.

Participants highlighted the importance of engaging parents and local communities more fully in early learning and care services and some saw increased roles for municipalities and schools in new regional service networks. They also saw value in working, where possible, to build on the current services in place.

Anticipated Stakeholder Agreement on Guidelines or Directions for Organizing Service Delivery

Participants saw most early learning and care stakeholders agreeing on the value of more closely integrating services at the local or regional level – connecting the fields of education and community-based early learning and care.

They argued that strengthening and consolidating services and supports for children and their families would be seen as a positive move by most stakeholders.

Similarly, participants considered the idea of some form of local management and planning of services to have the support of stakeholders, albeit with some questions around how regional decisions would be made and by what body or bodies.

They suggested that some service providers may not support new higher service standards, and noted that the current market model provides service operators with considerable autonomy which they may be reluctant to cede to a local or regional management or service planning entity. Participants in Calgary spoke to the potential challenges of closing services that do not meet newer and higher provincial standards.

Participants also noted that any discussions of additional costs for infrastructure and service management would raise questions of how these costs would be covered and by whom. They also noted some potential tensions between those programs and services offered and supported through school-based settings and those provided by private (non-profit and for-profit) organizations. Participants raised questions around how these different services would be accommodated in new local or regional service systems.

Key Considerations in Organizing Service Delivery

Participants identified a number of key considerations that will need to be taken into account in making changes to how services are organized at the regional or local level. They spoke to the need for a clear vision for early learning and care that is collectively developed and shared by key stakeholders including parents. Ideally, participants saw a balance being struck between overall provincial oversight and some form of regional or local management. They highlighted that regional differences would need to be accommodated within a larger system framework.

Participants highlighted the need to consider the best interests of children and families – recognizing that families have different needs and that service arrangements may look different across the province. They observed that reorganizing early learning and care services should form part of broader efforts to reorganize all services for children and their families.

Participants noted the importance of financing in thinking about how services might be reorganized at a regional or local level and the need to allocate sufficient time to implement change. They also emphasized the importance

of considering the workforce that would be required to support new service arrangements including the education and training for front-line and management staff.

3.3.4 Human Resources

The discussion of human resources fully engaged participants across the forums. The critical role of staff in the delivery of high quality early learning and care was central to many of the arguments participants raised.

In their opening discussion of the key themes, ideas and questions that emerge in respect to human resources, participants consistently identified the need to raise the profile of the early childhood educator profession both within the field and with external stakeholders – including parents and the general public. They argued that until the profession was supported by higher educational standards, improved professional development opportunities, better working conditions, and more competitive rates of remuneration it would be difficult to improve services for children and families. They commonly highlighted the significant differences in education and remuneration between early educators who work in school-based programs and those in community-based services.

While participants emphasized the need for a stronger early childhood educator profession – one that some saw as unifying all of the educators that work with young children below the mandatory school age – a number acknowledged the challenges that this would create for many of the current staff. They noted that these staff would need significant support to increase their formal education, and that some may be unwilling, or unable, to meet new higher education standards.

Participants also highlighted the potential challenges of recruiting and retaining qualified staff in smaller cities or communities (which are more isolated) as well as those with higher living costs.

Key Guidelines or Directions on Human Resources for Inclusion in a Provincial Framework

Participants emphasized the need to raise the minimum formal education requirements for staff in regulated or licensed early learning and care settings. Where they made specific comments on the level of education, participants advised that at minimum all staff should complete a two-year college level diploma. Some participants favored a four-year degree requirement. A number of participants cautioned against the use of equivalencies in lieu of specific education and training in early childhood education.

Participants further commented on the specific need to consider the education and training for family day home providers.

Participants mostly agreed that support should be available for those in the field to increase their formal education. On balance, they did not support allowing staff with lower levels of qualification to remain in the field over the longer term. A number saw merit in developing a new early learning and care post-secondary credential. Participants also saw value in ensuring that all staff that teach young children (including Kindergarten) have formal educational preparation in early childhood education.

In addition to higher educational requirements, participants also identified the need for improved ongoing professional development opportunities. Some envisaged early childhood educators completing ongoing professional development as a requirement for provincial certification. A number further supported the creation of a professional college for the early childhood educator profession.

Participants strongly highlighted the need for improved remuneration and benefits for early childhood educators - which they saw as essential to attract and retain qualified staff. They noted that increased educational requirements would need to be matched by increased rates of remuneration and a higher professional status for early childhood educators.

Participants noted that significant new public investments would be required to support the increase, over time, of educational standards and the provision of more competitive salaries and benefits. Some also commented on the need for new flexible models for delivering education and professional development including mentorship models and/or the use of technology. Participants in a number of centres advised of the possible challenges of recruiting higher qualified staff to rural or more isolated communities.

Participants saw a new provincial framework as an appropriate vehicle to advance the field through the commitment to higher educational standards that extend to all aspects of human resources including leadership and management. They acknowledged the significant scope and nature of the human resource changes required, which was reflected in the Edmonton discussions in support for a long term workforce strategy for the early learning and care field.

A related idea a number of participants surfaced was that of a multi-layered workforce, similar to those in place in other human service fields (e.g. nursing), which includes staff teams with complementary levels of formal educational

preparation and associated skills and competencies.

Anticipated Stakeholder Agreement on Guidelines or Directions for Human Resources

Participants saw early learning and care stakeholders as most likely to reach agreement on higher formal educational requirements for all staff working in the field. They advised that most early learning and care stakeholders would see merit in the move toward higher education requirements over an agreed extended time period, with existing staff eligible for some support to increase their own formal education. Participants also saw agreement within the field on the need for increased and ongoing professional development.

Participants also anticipated that those working in the field would see the merit in requiring kindergarten and pre-kindergarten teachers to complete specific early learning and care education – with a focus on early childhood development.

Consistent with the above changes in formal education and ongoing professional development, a number of participants supported the idea of provincial salary scales for early childhood educators to help raise the current low rates of remuneration. They argued that unless salary and benefit levels were significantly increased it would remain difficult to attract and retain qualified staff. They reported, however, some potential opposition to salary scales from service operators given the changes these would bring to current business models and practices. They advised that the increased public funding required to support higher staffing costs would have to be taken into consideration.

Participants commented that some existing staff who do not meet the proposed new education requirements may be reluctant to support changes that limit their own ability to work in the field. Similarly, they noted that some service providers may resist calls for increased education requirements for staff. They also advised that teachers and their professional body may be reluctant to support new educational requirements for teachers working with children below the mandatory school age.

Key Considerations around Human Resources

Participant observations on the key considerations in thinking about human resources drew on many of their earlier discussion themes. They emphasized, for example, the importance of human resources in delivering high quality early learning and care and highlighted the significant changes needed to support advancements in this key area.

Participants noted the complex evolution of services and the challenges of attracting and retaining qualified staff given the low rates of remuneration and the limited view that many external stakeholders have of the field.

Participants affirmed the need to think in terms of a longer term strategy to introduce change recognizing that services will need to continue to operate during the periods of transition. They saw the need for significant leadership at the provincial government level to advance higher educational standards for the field, as well as a parallel need to engage front-line staff in discussions of how best to advance the profession. Participants further highlighted the need to revise the current educational and training models for staff entering the field.

Participants noted the growing diversity of user populations and the unique regional factors that can shape and affect service delivery. They emphasized that a significant change in the current funding model is required to support increased education requirements and more competitive remuneration and benefits for early childhood educators.

3.3.5 A Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Care

In their opening discussions on the key themes, ideas and questions that emerge around the implementation of a curriculum framework, participants raised the following major points or arguments. Participants generally viewed the development and implementation of a common curriculum framework as a positive move; one that has the potential to raise the quality of services. They cautioned that a curriculum framework must fit the early learning and care needs of young children and their families and should not represent a downward extension of curricula intended for older children. In this regard, participants emphasized the importance of drawing on the research around best practice and in recognizing the diversity among children and their families. Some participants identified challenges around the use of the word ‘curriculum’ and spoke to the need for the development of shared understandings around the term curriculum framework.

Participants saw the need for leadership at different levels to implement a well-developed curriculum resource and raised some questions around the current capacity of many programs and services to effectively use a curriculum resource. As in the discussion of other service elements, they identified the need for dedicated resources to support the implementation and use of a curriculum framework, and raised questions around which bodies would lead the work.

Some participants saw the potential for a curriculum framework to be used more broadly to support families and parents in their role as children's first teachers.

Key Guidelines or Directions for a Curriculum Framework for Inclusion in a Provincial Framework

Participants saw the need to clearly state the goals and purposes of any proposed curriculum framework in a provincial framework, as well guidelines and expectations for its use. They strongly emphasized the need for the curriculum framework to draw on the growing body of research on best practices in early learning and care and for it to connect with the differing family traditions and cultures across the province. A number of participants spoke to the need for a curriculum framework to include and respect parents and families as key partners in early learning and care.

Participants similarly identified the need for a provincial framework to comment on the resources required to support the implementation and use of a curriculum framework. They suggested that the use of the curriculum framework should be required in all services and programs that receive public funding – an idea which some participants did not support. Participants highlighted the need to develop strong pedagogical leadership in service organizations to make the best possible use of the curriculum resource.

Thinking more broadly, participants identified the need for resources to help parents and families understand how a common curriculum framework can support high quality early learning and care across different program sites.

A number of participants raised questions of how existing curricula would be accommodated (or not) within a new provincial curriculum framework.

Anticipated Stakeholder Agreement on Guidelines or Directions around a Curriculum Framework

The majority of participants agreed that early learning and care stakeholders would, in the main, welcome a curriculum framework to guide and support practice. They commented that stakeholders would see a curriculum framework as a potential vehicle to raise practice standards across the field.

More specifically, participants reached general agreement that a curriculum framework that supported children as active, engaged learners and that drew on the widely accepted practice of learning through play would be supported by most service providers. They advised that the framework would also need to accommodate different cultural traditions.

In terms of areas of potential disagreement, participants noted that some stakeholders still view the term curriculum with caution and may not be familiar with the concept of a curriculum framework. They also advised that some service providers may not be as open to new program models. Similarly, they advised that some service providers already have curriculum models in place and may be reluctant to move away from them.

More broadly, participants commented that the difference in early learning environments (for example between day homes and child care centres) may lead some stakeholders to question the fit or value of a particular curriculum framework. They noted that some service providers may also raise concerns about the time and resources required to prepare staff to work with a new program resource. The heavy workloads and absence of funded preparation time for front-line staff may make some service providers reluctant to support a new curriculum framework, as may the expectations of parents around how and what their children need to learn prior to entering public education.

Finally, a small number of participants raised the concern that a curriculum framework developed with early learning and care approaches to the fore may not be as well received in school-based programs which may favour more traditional educational approaches.

Key Considerations Around a Curriculum Framework

Participants identified the critical links required between any proposed curriculum framework and the agreed goals for early learning and care. They emphasized that the design and implementation of curriculum framework would need to be done well and would require dedicated resources.

Participants highlighted the need to consider the capacity of service staff to use a curriculum framework resource, and to recognize that supports would be required to increase parents' knowledge and understanding of the framework and its contribution to early learning and care. They noted some potential regional differences in the capacity of service providers to implement and use a curriculum resource.

They emphasized the need to ensure that the curriculum framework draws on current theory around best early learning and care practice and remains responsive to the differing cultural traditions of Alberta's diverse population. Participants also highlighted the need to ensure that parents and families contribute their voices to the design and shaping of a curriculum framework.

3.4 Reflections on Moving Towards the Closer Integration of Early Learning and Care

As the final part of the consultations, participants indicated their personal level of support for advancing change that more closely integrates early learning and care in Alberta and provided their thoughts on the next critical steps required to move the development of a provincial framework forward. Participants worked individually during these final sessions.

3.4.1 Participant Level of Support for Advancing Change

Participants indicated their level of support for more closely integrating early learning and care for each of the six major areas outlined in the background documents and explored in the forum discussions: governance, goals and purposes, financing, organizing services, the early learning and care workforce and a curriculum framework for early learning and care.

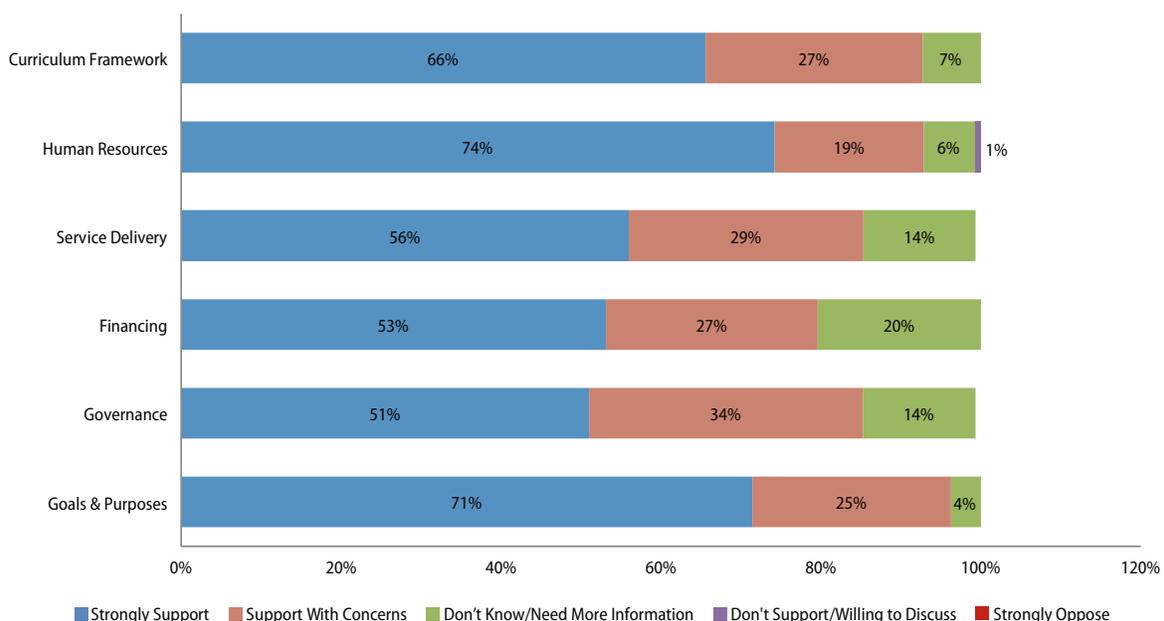
Across the forums, participants either strongly supported or supported with concerns advancing change in each of these related areas (see chart below). There were some regional variations in the levels of support for change. Participants in Edmonton most strongly supported introducing change, while those in Lethbridge were more equally divided between strongly supporting change and supporting changes with some concerns.

Participants expressed the highest levels of support for change in the areas of human resources and goals and purposes. Specifically, in terms of human resources they reaffirmed the main arguments advanced in their earlier discussions and highlighted the need to increase the minimum education requirements for staff while also addressing the current low rates of remuneration.

From the perspective of goals and purposes participants focussed on the need to more clearly articulate the outcomes that public and private investments are intended to achieve, while ensuring that these are then reflected in how services are designed, funded and delivered.

Participant support for changes in the area of a curriculum framework drew on the identified needs to raise overall program standards, to ensure some consistency across services, and to support service delivery with strong credible resources. The stronger expressions of ‘support with concerns’ was linked to cautions that a curriculum framework might have a more formal education focus as

Stakeholder Support for Changes that More Closely Integrate Early Learning and Care by Key Service Dimensions



compared to an early learning and care one. There were also some concerns with the ability of service providers to implement a curriculum framework and how such a framework would accommodate differing family and cultural traditions.

Participants expressed lower levels of ‘strong support’ for change in the areas of financing, governance and organizing services, with higher levels of ‘support with concerns’.

In terms of governance, participants offered differing views on where the overall authority for early learning and care should reside at a ministerial level. They also commented on the need for more discussions among the stakeholders on the different facets of governance.

From the perspective of financing, participants raised concerns about whether or not new public resources would be available to support significant change, and how these resources might best be distributed to support high quality service delivery. A number, particularly in the Calgary consultation, indicated that more discussion of these matters was required.

In terms of organizing service delivery, participants raised concerns about the need to address key issues around goals and purposes, financing, and human resources before looking to reorganize services. They also raised questions about the current nature of the service landscapes and whether initially, at least, more effort should be placed on improving their quality and parents’ level of access to services rather than a larger redesign of how services are organized.

3.4.2 Possible Next Steps to Move the Development of a Provincial Framework Forward

Participants emphasized the need to broaden the current consultations on a possible new provincial framework to include other stakeholder groups. They recognized the significant nature of the proposed changes and advised that families and other community stakeholders would need to be engaged in future discussions as changes were proposed or took place.

A number of stakeholders raised the possibility of linking discussions of changes in early learning and care with the work underway as part of the province-wide reporting of findings from the Early Development Instrument. They saw some shared interests with the work of the community

coalitions which have come together to consider local results.

Participants also commented on the need to continue discussions with the early learning and care community and suggested that the next phase of the work may involve stakeholders responding to a draft framework design. They noted the diversity of the early learning community and the need to ensure that all of the stakeholders are engaged in some way in future discussions.

Participants identified the need for leadership at a number of levels to move the field forward including that of the key government ministries with jurisdiction over early learning and care. They noted the fragmented nature of the early learning and care community, as well as the limited resources available to it for planning and design work around significant change.

A number of participants identified the value of beginning the larger change process through specific and strategic steps that the early learning and care community could work on together in a collaborative way. They emphasized the enthusiasm that many stakeholders have for advancing the field and identified the current political climate as a positive one in which to consider and advance change. Participants identified the need for concrete steps to be taken in the shorter term, guided by a larger plan or provincial framework, that provide stakeholders with some sense that the process of change is beginning.

4 Concluding Thoughts and Observations

The consultation process provided an invited group of early learning and care stakeholders with the opportunity to consider the design and structure of a new provincial framework for early learning and care in Alberta. Across seven regional consultations, participants voiced their support for the closer integration of early learning and care services over time with the guidelines or directions for this closer integration outlined in a new provincial framework.

Participants reached some level of agreement on the general elements of a framework, and the guidelines or directions that it might include. They further indicated their support for the move to advance significant change in how early learning and care is funded and delivered while recognizing that these changes would require time and resources to develop and implement.

Participants offered differing ideas, shared varying perspectives and raised important questions about how Alberta might best approach the early learning and care of its youngest citizens and their families. These differences reflect some of the larger tensions or differing starting points that commonly shape the discussion of early learning and care: how early learning and care might best reconcile the dominant traditions of care and education; how a focus on child development or child well-being is reconciled with that of the broader support for the families in which young children live; the appropriate balance between that portion of the cost of service which is paid for privately by families and that portion which is covered through public investment; how best to accommodate regional and local differences in service capacities and needs within a provincially managed and supported system; and the most appropriate organizational vehicles through which to deliver services be they private or public, non-profit or for-profit, and local, regional or provincial in their ownership and operational model.

As cross-cutting themes within the discussions, participants spoke to the need to engage broader groups of these stakeholders in discussions of the possible future options for early learning and care, to work toward significant change over an extended timeframe, and to take into account the regional differences in service environments across the province. They also noted the potential challenges of calling for increased levels of public investment during times of fiscal restraint.

The importance of leadership in many forms, and at different levels, further underpinned much of the discussion, as did the need to begin the process of change sooner rather than later. Participants spoke often of the current challenges that service providers face in delivering high quality early learning and care and the related difficulties that families face in accessing services that meet their needs. They saw merit (and an opportunity) to build on the current climate of goodwill and motivation to advance change within the field which aligns well with the critical rethinking of services for children and families included as part of the provincial government's commitment to develop a broader Social Policy Framework for the province.

Based on participant discussions, some initial redesign of services involving the development and implementation of a common curriculum resource, increased support for higher levels of staff education, training and remuneration, and the building of closer connections between local service providers appear reasonable places to begin the more substantial redevelopment (and closer integration) of early learning and care over an extended timeframe. Participants saw a clear statement of the goals and purposes for early learning and care as foundational to the larger redesign of services, with a significant effort required to engage parents and families in the discussion of these goals.

The broader needs to raise the literacy of different constituents around early learning and care, to ensure that service delivery practices remain grounded in research and are based on evidence, and to better understand how the needs of children across the province can best be supported remain as longer term works in progress that will require consideration and attention throughout the shift in policy direction and strategy.



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