

TORONTO STAFF REPORT

September 21, 2005

To: Community Services Committee
From: Deputy City Manager
Subject: Setting a Benchmark for Improving Children's Outcomes

Purpose:

This report outlines the use of the Early Development Instrument as a tool for measuring children's outcomes and proposes the adoption of a benchmark to improve the outcomes of children in Toronto.

Financial Implications and Impact Statement :

There are no financial implications resulting from this report.

Recommendations :

It is recommended that:

- (1) the City adopt benchmarks for improvement of child outcomes;
- (2) the Early Development Instrument (EDI) be adopted as the first of these measures for preschool children;
- (3) the 80th percentile be set as the benchmark in each of the EDI domains;
- (4) City Divisions serving children develop future service plans in support of this benchmark; and
- (5) the appropriate City Officials be authorized and directed to take the necessary action to give effect thereto.

Background:

City Council at its meeting of March 1, 2, and 3, 2004, in consideration of the 2003 Toronto Report Card on Children, directed that the Commissioner of Community Services Committee report on strategies to improve the well-being of children in those areas of the City with higher than 14 per cent rates of child poverty.

The Early Development Instrument, which consists of over 140 items, was designed to measure, at the community level, young children's readiness for schooling in five domains:

- (1) physical health/well being
- (2) social knowledge and competence
- (3) emotional health/maturity
- (4) language and cognitive development
- (5) communication skills and general knowledge

The 2003 Toronto Report Card on Children highlighted the relationship of EDI scores to child poverty levels. Further, an analysis of the assessment results indicates school readiness levels vary from one community to another.

At its meeting of July 19, 20, 21 and 26, 2005, Council adopted *The Best Generation Yet* as a framework to direct the City's planning for children. Through *Best Generation Yet*, the City reaffirmed the Toronto Vision for Children that regardless of the socio-economic status of his/her family and community, every child has the right to childhood experiences, which promote the chances of developing into a healthy, well-adjusted and productive adult.

The Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force recognized that the prosperity of the City is tied to the well being of its neighbourhoods and developed a measure of Neighbourhood Social Infrastructure in Toronto to assist in identifying neighbourhoods for investment.

Comments:

Based on the City's Vision for Children, Council has adopted *The Best Generation Yet*, which directs the development of a ten-year plan for comprehensive, integrated, inclusive and high quality services that support the best outcomes for children. The City's Vision recognizes the importance of universal provision of services within which additional supports are developed and provided to children in special circumstances to ensure equitable outcomes for all children. *Best Generation Yet* provides a framework for City divisional plans for children and the development of benchmarks to measure effectiveness of strategies and progress towards City's goals.

This report proposes the use of the Early Development Instrument as a measure of child outcome. It provides one type of benchmark to measure effectiveness of policy and programs for children in the City of Toronto. EDI measures the readiness to learn of children within a community and reflects the outcomes of children's early learning and development. It was developed by The Offord Centre for Child Studies at McMaster University. The measure was first developed in the early 1990's and is now used across Canada to inform planning and investment in children's services. It is administered by Kindergarten teachers during the Senior Kindergarten year. Although individual children are assessed, the results are tabulated and

provide a community overview and are, therefore, what is termed “population based”. EDI results are not used to track the progress of individuals, but communities. The Province has adopted this measure as a child outcome measure and is funding school boards to complete the EDI on a bi-annual basis. As a result, the measure will be readily available for City use. Current EDI results are based on the 2003 application by the Toronto District School Board for Junior Kindergarten students. Because the next set of EDI data will be more complete the current EDI results should be considered as preliminary. More recent applications of EDI have been completed by both the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Catholic District School Board. Detailed EDI data should be available to the municipality for this project and Best Start planning purposes by the end of this year.

As outlined in the Children’s Report Card there is a strong relationship between children’s EDI scores and family income. Appendix 1 maps high needs areas, those areas with high numbers of children living below Low Income Cut Off (LICO) and high proportion of children in LICO families, against the proportion of students with poor EDI results. Appendix 2 demonstrates the proportion of children scoring in the lowest 10th percentile in 2 or more EDI domains by concentration of children living in poverty grouped into quintiles. Both charts demonstrate the impact of child poverty on EDI results. This report proposes the establishment of a minimum benchmark equal to the 80th percentile in the range of outcomes across the City’s neighbourhoods. In other words, with appropriate supports, all children in all communities should do at least as well as the current top 20 percent. This benchmark will direct the activities of the City in planning for children’s services.

A review of the Appendix 1 demonstrates that not all high needs communities have poor child outcomes. Initial analysis suggests that in those neighbourhoods where children and families have access to high quality services EDI outcomes are improved. This finding is similar to the findings of the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force which identified the importance of community infrastructure as a support to strengthening neighbourhoods. Strategies to improve child outcomes must build on local community strengths and integrated approached to service planning.

In adopting *The Best Generation Yet* Council has directed that, to inform the 2007 budget, City divisions with responsibility for services for children submit a joint plan during the annual budget process to insure that planning, service provision and funding support integrated services, prevents gaps and overlaps and ensures equitable access to services City-wide by putting under-resourced communities first. Since May 2004 an interdivisional staff team has been meeting to review the impact of poverty on child outcomes in neighbourhoods across the City and to establish strategies to improve child outcomes through a focus on neighbourhoods. This approach builds on the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force neighbourhood focus. Neighbourhoods identified through the review of EDI are consistent with both those identified in the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force and the Community Safety Plan. Through a review of current services and analysis of families’ use of services, the interdivisional staff team will develop local strategies to improve services through improved investment and integrated service planning.

Conclusions:

By using the Early Development Instrument as a measure of child outcome this report proposes a benchmark to improve outcomes for children living in poverty. The use of this benchmark builds on the directions of *The Best Generation Yet*, will be included in the ten-year plan directed through BGY and provides direction to City Divisions that provide services to children. Integrated Service planning for children will build on the neighbourhood planning focus of the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force.

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List of Attachments:

- Appendix 1 – High Need Areas and the Early Development Instrument (EDI)
- Appendix 2 – Proportion of children scoring in the lowest 10th percentile in 2 or more EDI domains, by concentration of children in LICO families