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Early Learning and Care
For Every Child

Research findings from Phase 2 of Toronto First Duty and their implications for full day learning in Ontario

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Background: Initiated in 2000, Toronto First Duty (TFD) is a children's service delivery model that combines education, child care and family supports into a single program. For almost a decade TFD sites have served as laboratories for best practice in service design and have allowed policy makers, academics, experts and practitioners to "touch and feel" the difference between integrated and conventional service delivery.

TFD inspired the November 2007 appointment of Dr. Charles Pascal to advise the government on the best way to implement full day learning in Ontario. Working within this mandate the resulting report, *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing early learning in Ontario*, uses the opportunities provided by full day learning as a bridgehead to create a 0-12 child and family service system

http://www.ontario.ca/en/initiatives/early_learning/ONT06_018865.

Premier McGuinty embraced the Pascal approach and beginning next September Ontario will become the first jurisdiction in North America to launch a universal, publicly-funded and operated learning and care program for four and five year olds.

But even the best policy blueprint is only as effective as its implementation and while it is early days, the parameters announced by the province signal a rough start for the new program. Following are some of the lessons from the Toronto First Duty research that can inform the foundation of full day learning:

Lesson 1. An integrated staff team improves program quality.

In the TFD model a professional team of kindergarten teachers, early childhood educators, family support staff and teaching assistants plan and deliver the program working from a single pedagogical approach and using the same space and resources. The research finds that with strong leadership, joint professional development and time for program planning, the integrated staff team strengthens the common pedagogy, curriculum and learning environment for children

The new Early Learning Program provides a full time teacher and two ECEs working with 26 children to provide a seamless experience throughout the extended day from 7:30 to 6 p.m. Knowledgeable and supported educators are prerequisites of good programming. The Pascal report recommends ECEs in the Early Learning Program form a new job classification with a salary rate of \$42k for a 10-month position plus 24% benefits.

Implementation challenges: If the Early Learning Program is to fulfill its promise, working conditions must be conducive to each member of the staff team applying her skills and knowledge to create the early learning environment. This is particularly essential in the Ontario context where only a third of kindergarten teachers have early child development training. Wage differentials between certified teachers and registered early childhood educators in the early learning program are expected and should reflect educational differences. However a teaching assistant classification and a \$30,000 annual salary is incompatible with an early learning environment where teachers and ECEs work side by side to deliver the program. For many experienced ECEs now working with four and five year olds switching to an Early Learning Program would mean a significant drop in salary. In addition, it is unclear if ECEs will be compensated for planning time; school breaks or if they will be included in professional development. Adverse working conditions will make it difficult to build the teaching team and recruit and retain the most qualified staff.

Lesson 2. An integrated approach to early childhood services encourages programming appropriate to the developmental needs of young children.

The Toronto First Duty design brings together the play-based approaches of early childhood education with the more academic learning aims of the Ministry of Education's Kindergarten Program. The TFD model appears to stand out in pushing back against developmentally inappropriate curriculum and pushing out a progressive vision of what early years learning should be: building engaging active learning; more coherence and less modularization; whole child development including supports to build self-regulation; parent capacity to work with schools; and, community supports for child development and learning

Also promising is the view of children themselves. Kindergarten-aged children in TFD sites did not distinguish between child care and school. In contrast, several children from the non-integrated sites described their child care as a place to “play” and kindergarten as “work”.

The Pascal report calls play “serious business” for the development of young learners. He draws on research and best practice indicating that deliberate and effective play-based approaches supports cognitive development and taps into children’s individual interests drawing out their emerging capacities. Play-based learning “generates highly motivated children enjoying an environment where the learning outcomes of a curriculum are more likely to be achieved”, the report says (p. 25).

Implementation challenges: Working conditions that discourage the development of a strong teaching team can threaten the play-based nature of the program.

Lesson 3: Integrated early childhood service delivery reduces daily stress and hassles in family life.

Parent surveys suggest higher levels of parent satisfaction with programming at Toronto First Duty sites compared to sites where kindergarten, child care and family support programs are offered separately.

Further study of the impact of integrated services on the daily lives of parents and their kindergarten-aged children indicated that service integration is associated with lower levels of daily parenting hassles, greater satisfaction with some forms of support, and creates fewer transitions for children throughout their day. In TFD sites, parents named both kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators as part of their social support network. At sites where kindergarten and child care are not integrated only early childhood educators were named.

Fewer transitions between home and school and between programs are associated with better child outcomes. The Pascal report documents the advantages of supportive programming and positive parent-school relationships to effective parenting, children’s educational success, reducing barriers for disadvantaged communities and building community cohesion. Year round programming is effective at reducing achievement gap between children living in advantaged and disadvantaged circumstances. Middle-class families build on their children’s literacy skills through summer activities. Children in low-income families do not have the same access and lose skills. As summer learning losses accumulate over the years, disadvantaged students fall further and further behind.

Implementation challenges: Offering extended day programming only during the 188 days that schools operate will create enormous challenges particularly for the 77% of Ontario families with both parents in the paid workforce. Child care programs are not in a position to reserve space and staff to cover off summer holidays, professional development days and school breaks. Parents will find their child care alternatives shrink and transitions for children between school and out-of-school programs will intensify.

Lesson 4: Integrated early childhood delivery facilitates parent participation in their child's early learning.

Later educational goals of reducing achievement gaps and school dropout rates begin with comprehensive early supports that engage families and build child readiness. Research found that parents in Toronto First Duty sites were more involved with their child's learning, felt better able to offer support, felt more empowered and responsible for speaking with program staff, and were more likely to sustain their involvement in their child's schooling through the primary grades than parents whose children attended conventional kindergarten and child care programs.

The Pascal report emphasizes parent involvement as a primary focus and advantage of full day learning. Creating schools as neighbourhood centres for families from birth onward is a proven outreach strategy.

Implementation challenges: A weak teaching team coupled with service hours that mitigate against integrated program delivery undermines parent engagement.

The promise of full day learning is vast and real. Implementation decisions made today will determine whether Ontario is on the road to an education revolution or tinkering on the sidelines. Public investments in early learning and child care have well documented benefits, but how and where investments are directed determine the results. The Pascal Report details how to effectively couple new public investments with existing resources to maximize results for children, families and communities. Toronto First Duty will continue to play an important role in informing best practice in early childhood program and system design.

The complete research report is available at:
www.toronto.ca/firstduty/TFD_phase2_final.pdf

How a Toronto First Duty site works

Bruce/WoodGreen Early Learning Centre

The Bruce/WoodGreen Early Learning Centre (*BWELC*) serves a mixed income community with a large new immigrant population. It is a Toronto First Duty (*TFD*) site demonstrating integrated, accessible child care/kindergarten/family service delivery. The Centre is located in Bruce Public Junior School, 51 Larchmount Avenue. Hours are 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Monday to Friday, year round. BWELC serves children and families from the pre-natal period to grade three. The school has classes up to grade six.

Site partners:

Bruce Public Junior School and WoodGreen Community Services (a multi-service community agency) are the lead site partners. The school principal and centre manager (employed by WoodGreen) jointly supervise the program. The management committee includes parents, WoodGreen; Bruce School; the City of Toronto's children's services and public health divisions; Toronto District School Board (TDSB); the Atkinson Charitable Foundation (ACF); the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

Five elements identify a TFD program:

- **Integrated governance:** The partners pool their resources to plan and deliver the program. Bruce School supplies the physical space and staffing including the principal, kindergarten teachers, parenting staff, teaching assistants and administrative support staff. WoodGreen supports the centre manager, ECE staff and resource teacher in addition to providing administrative assistance and professional development. TDSB contributes professional development and release time for the principal and kindergarten teachers in addition to the support of its superintendents and early years' department. The Foundation for Student Success supports the nutrition program. Toronto Public Health delivers pre- and post-natal programming, additional parenting programs and early identification & referrals. Children with special needs and families requiring additional assistance access help through WoodGreen, TDSB and the City of Toronto. ECEs also support classroom activities during school hours and direct after-school programming for children in Grades 1-3. The continuity of consistent adults is viewed as important particularly for children as they make the transition to the primary grades.

The Atkinson Centre for Child and Social Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education provides research and development. The Atkinson Charitable Foundation and City of Toronto provide funding for minor capital, start-up, and transition and operating costs. The TDSB funds the half-day program for children 3.8 – 5 years. Communications and research is supported by ACF.

- **Seamless access:** Through a single enrolment process families are able to access the full range of activities the program offers. Participation is flexible – parents may attend at anytime with their children.
- **Integrated early learning environment:** The school's classrooms are licensed under the Day Nurseries Act allowing multi-use of space to support children's development and health and safety standards.
- **Staff teams:** A teaching team of early childhood educators, kindergarten teachers, parenting staff and educational assistants deliver the program using a common curriculum, resources and space the program. Integrated staffing allows a child/adult (teacher or ECE) ratio approximating the requirements of the *Day Nurseries Act* and is well below the provincial 20-children/teacher cap proposed for kindergarten-aged children.
- **Parent participation:** Parent participation is paramount to children's success. Parents are welcome to take place in all the activities of the Centre all the time. This includes eating lunch or snacks with their children, joining in their children's classroom activities and participating in adult-only classes or in parent/child activities.

BWELC demonstrates the potential of integrated early years programming. It meets the multiple and changing needs of families with a variety of supports and resources.