



## STAFF REPORT ACTION REQUIRED

### The Provincial Early Learning Plan and Implications for Toronto Public Health

<b>Date:</b>	March 4, 2010
<b>To:</b>	Board of Health
<b>From:</b>	Medical Officer of Health
<b>Wards:</b>	All
<b>Reference Number:</b>	

#### **SUMMARY**

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In June 2009, Dr Charles Pascal, the Special Advisor on Early Learning, presented his report “With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario”, to the Premier. This report offers a bold vision for the transformation of early learning, extended child care, and family supports in Ontario. Based on solid evidence and best practice, this vision for Ontario’s and Toronto’s young children and families offers significant potential for improving family access to service and optimizing developmental outcomes for children.

The Early Learning Plan proposed in the report includes a number of recommendations that have implications for public health funding, service, and accountability. It is consistent with the goals of the Reproductive Health and Child Health requirements of the Ontario Public Health Standards and offers public health a new means of reaching out to pregnant women, young children and families. Consequently it is recommended that the Board of Health support the overall vision of the Plan.

The provincial government has endorsed the full day learning and extended child care components of the Plan. There is, however, less clarity about the Province’s commitment to the broader vision.

This report provides a general description of the implications of the Early Learning Report for public health services, and identifies those recommendations that the public health community and Toronto Public Health supports and those that may be of concern and/or require further clarity. This report also describes provincial and local activities that ensure that public health is at the Early Years planning tables.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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### **The Medical Officer of Health recommends:**

1. That the Board of Health write to the Premier of Ontario offering support for the Plan identified in the “With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario” report, and calling on the Province to endorse the full plan and to ensure that:
  - a. Boards of Health remain responsible for delivery of the Healthy Babies, Healthy Children (HBHC) program;
  - b. Boards of Health receive sufficient and sustainable funding to support a full range of Reproductive Health and Child Health services in the Best Start Child & Family Centres (BSC&FC), including Healthy Babies Healthy Children, Preschool Speech and Language, and Infant Hearing;
2. That the Medical Officer of Health collaborate with Toronto Children’s Services (the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager) to seek opportunities to integrate appropriate early childhood public health program activities into child and family centres where feasible; and
3. This report be sent to the Minister of Children and Youth Services, the Minister of Education, the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care, the Minister of Health Promotion, the General Manager of Toronto Children’s Services Division, and the Toronto Best Start Network.

### **Financial Impact**

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

### **DECISION HISTORY**

Toronto Children’s Services Division presented a report entitled “Implementation of Early Learning Program and Toronto’s Child Care Funding Risks and Pressures” to the Community Development and Recreation Committee at its December 16, 2009 meeting. This report was then forwarded to City Council at its January 2010 meeting. The report sought to reaffirm the City’s principles and objectives related to the Provincial government’s Early Learning initiative; clarify strategies and requirements to effectively advance the program; clarify Provincial intentions with respect to implementing Early Learning and other issues impacting child care services; formalize the working relationship with Provincial and educational stakeholders regarding implementation of Early Learning; and outline fiscal risks and pressures facing the child care system and recommended strategies to address them. Both the Community Development and Recreation Committee and City Council affirmed their support of the full Early Learning vision and authorized staff to support and assist provincial ministries to develop and implement the Early Learning Program. The full report can be found at <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2010/cd/bgrd/backgroundfile-26135.pdf>.

These actions will build on Toronto's already strong commitment to children as demonstrated by City Council's approval of the 1999 Toronto Vision for Children and the City's Strategy for Children. City Council's approval of the Best Generation Yet – Toronto Vision for Children in 2005, established a framework for integrated service planning in the City. More recently, City Council approved the City's Best Start Plan Update in July 2007 and the Middle Childhood Strategy Framework in August 2009, both of which support service system planning for children from prenatal to age 12 years.

## **ISSUE BACKGROUND**

In June 2009, Dr Charles Pascal, Special Advisor on Early Learning, presented his report "With Our Best Future In Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario" to the Premier. This report outlined a bold plan for the future of early learning, child care and service delivery for children and families, prenatally to age 12 years of age in Ontario. This plan recognizes that "our best future is one in which all children are healthy and secure; emotionally and socially competent; eager, confident and successful learners; and respectful of the diversity of their peers".<sup>1</sup> The plan outlines a comprehensive system in which:

- Every child in Ontario who is four years of age by December 31 would be entitled to attend two years of a full-day school-year Early Learning Program operated by school boards;
- Parents would have the option of extended programming before and after the traditional school day and year, as part of the Early Learning Program;
- Extended programming for school children aged 6 to 12 would be offered by school boards;
- Parent fees would be charged only for extended day/year programming; and
- Programs for children and their families would be integrated into Best Start Child and Family Centres, under a single municipal system manager. The centres would provide:
  - Flexible, part-time and full-day/full-year early learning/care options for children up to 4 years of age;
  - Prenatal and postnatal information and supports;
  - Parenting and family support programming, including home visiting, family literacy and playgroups;
  - Nutrition and nutrition counseling;
  - Early identification and intervention resources; and
  - Links to special needs treatment and community resources, including libraries, recreation and community centres, health care, family counseling, housing, language services, and employment/training services

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<sup>1</sup> Pascal, Charles. With our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario. Government of Ontario, June 2009, pg. 5

Dr. Pascal's report includes a broad range of recommendations to achieve this plan. The recommendations address leadership for a child and family service system, programming, staffing, and program and system monitoring.

In October 2009, the Premier announced the government's response to the plan and its recommendations. Beginning in September 2010, Ontario will start phasing in full day learning for four and five year olds. Full implementation is expected by 2016. The Province has established an Early Years Division within the Ministry of Education to lead planning and implementation. To-date, there has been no formal commitment to the full plan for Early Learning as outlined in Dr. Pascal's report.

## **COMMENTS**

While the primary focus of the Early Learning Plan and the current initiatives to implement it are on the implementation of full day learning for 4 and 5 year olds and the provision of child care for these children, the broader vision includes public health services and programs. There are a number of recommendations that will have implications for public health service planning, delivery, and accountability. It is important to note, however, that these are included in the part of the plan that that Premier has not yet publicly endorsed.

Dr. Pascal's plan for children and families is grounded in early child development literature. In 1999, the Mustard and McCain Early Years Study<sup>2</sup> presented the science of early childhood development and proposed public policy to ensure quality programs for all young children and their families. Similarly, the Canadian Council on Learning has identified that the experiences of young children have a major impact on their success in school and later in life.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the plan is based on best practice in the area of early learning, child care and children's and family programming. It builds on existing, proven strategies such as the Ontario Best Start Strategy and Toronto's First Duty Project.

Of particular interest to public health is the plan's potential to address health and learning inequalities in children. James Heckman, author of "The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools", identified that gaps in children's learning that are present at age 5 years can have an impact on motivation, emotional stability, self-control and sociability that last a lifetime.<sup>4</sup> In 2008, The Unequal City Report identified that based on Early Development Index scores, 28% of Toronto children in kindergarten were considered not ready to learn at school entry. A report also identified that "there was a significant difference in the percent of children scored as not ready to learn

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<sup>2</sup> McCain, M. & Mustard, F., Early Years Study. Toronto, Ontario. Government of Ontario, 1999

<sup>3</sup> Canadian Council on Learning, Report on the State of Early Childhood Learning in Canada. Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, pg. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Heckman, J. "The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children". Big Ideas for Children: Investing in Our Nation's Future. Washington, DC, pg. 49.

between children in the lowest income quintile (34%) compared to children in the highest income quintile (20%)”.<sup>5</sup>

Currently, there is a patchwork of funding and accountability that supports community services for young children and their families. The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and the Ministry of Health Promotion all have a mandate that relates to these services. Dr. Pascal’s Report recommends the establishment of a single ministry that will be responsible for driving change, providing overall governance and ensuring clear policy direction. This single ministry would develop an Early Years Policy Framework. In response to this, the Province has established the Early Years Division at the Ministry of Education. While leadership from the Ministry of Education is a logical choice given the pivotal nature of the full day learning component of the Early Learning Plan, co-ordination with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and the Ministry of Health Promotion will continue to be essential.

### **Implication for Public Health**

At a local level, the Report calls for municipalities to play a leadership role in planning, developing, supporting and monitoring an integrated network of service through the development of an Early Years Service Plan. The Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM) will work with boards of education and other community children’s service partners to ensure that local priorities and circumstances are considered. For the City of Toronto, the CMSM is the Children’s Services Division. Toronto Public Health has a long history of working collaboratively with Children’s Services Division on children’s initiatives, such as the Early Years Challenge Fund, the First Duty Project, planning for the Ontario Early Years Centres, and the provision of healthy food in day care centres. This approach is also consistent with the current Best Start Strategy and offers significant potential for strong municipal leadership at the local level.

The establishment of Best Start Child and Family Centres has the potential to significantly improve access to service for children and families. The current patchwork of child and family services can be very confusing and challenging for parents to navigate. With respect to public health services, it may be possible for a full range of programs to be offered to children and families through these Centres. This would include preconception and prenatal education, breastfeeding promotion and support, family/parent education, early identification and referral, nutrition education, preschool speech and language intervention, infant hearing screening, and access to the Healthy Babies Healthy Children program. This would support the delivery of the Reproductive Health and Child Health services required in the Ontario Public Health Standards and significantly improve service access, delivery and co-ordination for families.

### **Areas of Concern**

While the recommendations related to the implementation of full day learning and extended child care for four and five year olds are relatively specific in nature, the recommendations that relate to the broader plan, including the establishment of Best Start

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<sup>5</sup> Toronto Public Health, *The Unequal City: Inequalities in Toronto*, 2008, pg. 13.

Child and Family Centres, are at a higher level and provide a general direction rather than specific actions. Consequently, there are a number of recommendations that require further clarification before the full impact on public health and Toronto Public Health can be determined.

One concern is that the Report does not appear to reflect a full understanding of the range of public health services that are offered to pregnant women, children and families. It focuses on the Healthy Babies Healthy Children program as the primary public health program and does not reflect the broader range of services delivered under the Reproductive Health and Child Health requirements of the Ontario Public Health Standards. Nor does it appreciate the level of integration between the HBHC program and other public health reproductive health and child health programs. Efforts are already underway by the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) and the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA) to ensure that the new Early Years Division of the Ministry of Education has a full understanding of public health services.

Related to this is the recommendation to consolidate all existing transfer payments for programs that would be delivered in the Best Start Child and Family Centres into a single envelope under municipal authority. There is some concern that this could include a transfer of the funding and accountability for the HBHC program to the CMSM. OPHA and a number of individual public health units are advocating that HBHC remain under the leadership of Boards of Health as an integral part of a comprehensive family health program.

Also with respect to the HBHC program, there is a recommendation that funding for Best Start Child and Family Centres and the services provided in them will be found through the re-engineering and consolidation of existing programs and resources. There are two concerns related to this recommendation.

The first concern relates to public health's capacity to deliver services through school-based Best Start Child and Family Centres. If this plan was fully achieved in the City of Toronto, there could be more than 800 Best Start Child and Family Centres throughout the City. While this could be an excellent venue for public health service provision in principle, it is extremely unlikely that, without substantial additional funding, Toronto Public Health would have the necessary resources to deliver services at that many sites.

The second concern relates to Ministry of Children and Youth Services 100% funded programs. For the past several years, public health units, including Toronto Public Health, have identified growing concerns with funding levels. The June 2009 Board of Health report, "Update on Public Health Programs Funded by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services" identified significant concerns with funding for HBHC, Preschool Speech and Language and Infant Hearing programs and identified resulting service level reductions. It is unlikely that the funding recommendation proposed in the Early Learning Report will address the funding pressures currently experienced by these programs and continued advocacy will be necessary to address anticipated funding shortfalls in 2010 and beyond.

### **Taking Action on the Early Learning Plan**

The public health response to Dr. Pascal's Early Learning Plan has occurred at a number of levels, both provincially and locally.

Both OPHA and alPHa are working to identify and address public health issues related to the Plan and its recommendations. In January of this year, OPHA and alPHa collaborated with the Ontario Municipal Social Service Association (OMSSA) to host a forum of public health, social service and community agency service providers. The purpose of the forum was to discuss and strategize on the recommendations specifically related to the establishment of the BSC&FC. Toronto Public Health participated on the planning committee and on the agenda for this forum. This was an important first step in voicing the public health implications of the broader plan.

Both OPHA and alPHa are also participating on an OMSSA work group that has received an Atkinson Foundation grant to develop a local Early Years Service Plan template. This will ensure that the Early Years Service Plans will appropriately include a full range of public health services. Toronto Public Health's Healthy Families Director represents OPHA on that work group.

The City of Toronto has established a Children's Integrated Management Committee to lead the early years service planning process and set strategic direction for the integration of City and community services related to the implementation of Early Learning and Care. The Committee is chaired by the Deputy City Manager and membership includes Children's Services Division, Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division, and Toronto Public Health. In January of this year, the Committee approved a "hub" pilot project that will test several BSC&FC "hub" models within Toronto, linking this plan with community hubs in priority neighbourhoods and Toronto District School Board hub development. Staff from Toronto Public Health will be participating in these pilots.

Building on Toronto's existing integrated children's service planning infrastructure that includes the broader community, the Toronto Best Start Network is also committed to supporting planning, implementing and evaluating Toronto's Early Learning Plan. The Best Start Network and related subcommittees and work groups are currently in the process of reviewing their terms of reference to establish their role in supporting the Plan. Toronto Public Health was one of three primary signatories of the original terms of reference and will continue to participate actively on the Network and all related subcommittees and working groups.

The Vision for early learning, child care and service delivery for prenatal women, children and families presented in Dr. Pascal's Early Learning Plan offers significant potential for more effective and efficient public health service delivery and could have a significant impact on closing the learning gap for children in the City of Toronto. Toronto Public Health will remain actively engaged in planning and implementing the Plan for early learning, child care and service delivery, at both the provincial and local level. This will include ensuring that public health services and programs are

appropriately integrated into the Provincial Early Years Policy Framework and the City of Toronto Early Years Service Plan. It will also include ongoing advocacy for sustainable funding for public health services.

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## **SIGNATURE**

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