



## REPORT FOR ACTION

### **Assessments of Licensed Child Care Conducted by the City of Toronto and the Ministry of Education**

**Date:** August 18, 2017

**To:** Community Development and Recreation Committee

**From:** General Manager of Children's Services

**Wards:** All

#### **SUMMARY**

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This report responds to Council's directive from February 15th, 2017 to:

Review the overlapping of services provided by the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario as a result of the Child Care and Early Years Act and report back in the third quarter of 2017. The review included consultation with the relevant City divisions and child care providers, including City-operated child care centres and independent and non-profit child care providers.

This report has also been informed by a review of relevant materials by the Children's Services' Risk Management team, and ongoing feedback received through post-assessment surveys. The findings reveal that the City's Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI) tool is a more detailed assessment of program quality, however some areas of overlap were identified. Other identified areas for improvement include creating a more positive and supportive experience for operators, and enabling parents to have a more informed understanding of the scores and the context in which assessments are conducted. Children's Services is taking steps to address these issues.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The General Manager, Children's Services recommends that:

1. The Community Development and Recreation Committee receive this report for information.

## FINANCIAL IMPACT

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This report has no financial implications.

The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

## DECISION HISTORY

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At its meeting of October 2, 3 and 4, 2012, City Council endorsed the City's response to the Modernizing Child Care in Ontario Discussion Paper produced by the Ministry of Education. The response included a recommendation that Province-wide quality assurance guidelines be in place with the City of Toronto's quality assessment process, as a reliable and validated tool, used as the base for such a program. The report reinforced that the application of the tool and reporting of results should remain a CMSM (Consolidated Municipal Service Manager) responsibility."

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2012.CD15.7>

At its meeting on October 8, 9, 10 and 11, 2013, City Council adopted the following: City Council authorize the General Manager, Children's Services to negotiate and execute on behalf of the City, agreements with other municipalities which set out the terms and conditions under which those municipalities can use the Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI) and access support services from City staff on a full cost recovery basis; and provide quality assessments to Toronto child care centres that do not have a service contract for fee subsidy with the City, when an assessment is requested by the centre, on a cost-recovery basis.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2013.CD23.2>

At its meeting on February 15 and 16, 2017, City Council adopted the following: City Council request the City Manager to review the overlapping of services provided by the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario as a result of the Child Care and Early Years Act and report back in the third quarter of 2017. The review should include consultation with the relevant City divisions and child care providers, including City-operated child care centres and independent and/or non-profit child care providers.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2017.EX22.2>

## COMMENTS

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### Background

All licensed early learning programs that receive City of Toronto funding are visited by the Ministry of Education, Toronto Public Health and Toronto Children's Services. Each of these visits plays a critical but distinct role in ensuring that children and families who access these programs are in environments that are safe and hygienic, with responsive educators and developmentally appropriate learning experiences. The provincial

licensing inspection process reflects legislative and regulatory requirements to operate a child care centre; Toronto Public Health (TPH) has legislative authority to inspect institutions as outlined in the Health Protection and Promotion Act; and Children's Services is mandated by the Province to ensure quality in early learning programs, as the Consolidated Service System Manager (CISM).

### **Ministry of Education Child Care Licensing**

The Ministry of Education oversees the licensing of child care centres in Ontario based on requirements set out in the *Child Care and Early Years Act* (CCEYA), 2014. The purpose of the Act is to "foster the learning, development, health and well-being of children and to enhance their safety". Licensed child care centres must meet and maintain specific provincial standards set out in regulation under the Act. These standards address items such as staff to child ratios, the physical environment, staff qualifications, and children's health and well-being.

The licensing inspection process ensures that these legislated requirements are in place. Licensing standards are the baseline requirements to operate a child care centre. Like other licensed businesses, child care centres must have a licence in order to operate. With the introduction of the Province's new early year's pedagogy (How Does Learning Happen) and Modernization Act, licensing processes were updated to include some items related to child development.

Historically, licensing visits have occurred on an annual basis. Recently the Ministry of Education introduced tiered licensing. Under this approach, certain operators with strong histories of compliance with licensing requirements will receive abbreviated versions of the inspection. However, information from the Ministry of Education indicates that currently no operators have yet met the eligibility criteria for this process, and thus, the full impacts of tiered licensing are not yet known.

### **Toronto Children's Services Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI)**

As the service system manager for child care and early year programs and services in Toronto, Toronto Children's Services has a mandate to ensure and improve the quality of early learning programs across Toronto. In 2015, Council endorsed Children's Services' 2015-2019 Service Plan. The first of five strategic directions of the plan is to ensure access to high-quality child care, with a strong focus on measuring and supporting quality across the system.

Children's Services implements a quality framework, which includes multiple dimensions for assessing, supporting, and building capacity for high quality programs. The Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI) tool is the City's approach for evaluating program quality, informing professional learning across the sector, and ensuring accountable use of public funds.

The current version of the tool was developed through consultation with the sector and is based upon research and best practices of high quality programs. The tool is comprised of quality indicators along a five point scale, and provides clear expectations,

service standards and guidelines for quality. It includes three main components: programming, environment, and educator interactions.

The AQI is used to assess early learning and child care programs delivered by agencies with a service contract with the City. In 2016, 739 centres were assessed. Assessments are conducted annually by trained Quality Assurance Analysts (QAAs) employed by Children's Services. QAAs are assigned randomly generated caseloads and assessment visits are unannounced. In 2014, in response to community feedback, a "Corrected During Assessment" process was introduced, which allows operators to correct some items that do not meet minimum quality requirements during their assessment visit.

Quality ratings are published on the Children's Services' website and assist parents to make informed decisions about their child care options. For families already in the early learning system, it provides annual quality information on their preferred child care choice. This website receives approximately 8,000 hits per month.

According to researchers from Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE/UT), "the biggest contribution made by the AQI is the relative efficiency, compared to existing measures of global classroom ECEC (Early childhood Education and Care) quality. The AQI takes approximately 1.5 hours to assess a room, whereas comparable rating scales take up to 4 hours per room.

Significant improvements in quality have been achieved over time. Since Children's Services began publishing results in 2009, centres meeting minimum quality requirements increased from 67 per cent to over 90 per cent.

The AQI as a credible measurement tool for quality. It is the only Canadian tool that has been validated as a measure of child care quality. Validating a measurement tool is a formalized way of ensuring that the tool reliably measures what it is intended to measure. Validation is completed by subjecting the tool to extensive scientific testing. One such approach is to compare it against other validated assessment scales.

Beginning in 2009, Children's Services partnered with researchers from the OISE to validate the AQI measure for the preschool age group. This study was later extended to the infant and toddler age groups; all sections of the AQI are now validated, with the exception of the before and after school section. Following the completion of the validation study in 2014, this research was published in the Journal of Early Education and Development. Potential changes to the tool must be carefully considered and investigated to ensure that the tool upholds its validation.

In order to ensure that the assessment is consistently and accurately implemented regardless of who administers it, an inter-rater reliability process is in place. Inter-rater reliability ensures that all individuals administering the measure apply it in the same way. This is achieved through ongoing training and testing as per industry standards. In Toronto, the QAAs go through rigorous testing three times a year to maintain inter-rater reliability.

The AQI generates useful data that shows the level of quality across Toronto's system. Children's Services District Consultant's use the data to identify operators that may require additional support and to inform ongoing coaching and mentoring. The data also informs capacity building across the sector. Toronto Children's Services co-leads a Regional Capacity-Building Table made up of service system managers that look for opportunities to deliver training and share resources.

The assessment outcomes are used to inform professional learning sessions and events, aggregated AQI results are a key input to this work. In 2016, Children's Services with its partners, offered over 200 professional learning sessions related to quality and pedagogy, with over 4,500 attendees from the child care community. As a key component of Toronto's Quality Framework, Children's Services also uses the data to inform strategic planning and policy decisions for growing and improving the sector.

The AQI data also helps ensure that public funds are used in appropriate and transparent ways. For centres that do not meet minimum quality requirements, sanctions such as a Stop Admission may be applied. This results in children in receipt of fee subsidy, not being admitted into the centre until minimum quality standards are met. As a last resort, a centre's service contract may be terminated.

### **Children's Services' Internal Review of Child Care Assessments**

In 2016, Children's Services conducted a line-by-line review to compare the areas evaluated by the licensing and AQI processes to identify any areas of overlap. While there are similarities in the broad themes addressed, there are few areas of direct duplication. In cases of similarities, the CCEYA tends to have more open, less defined requirements, (for example, requiring "a variety of play materials"), whereas the AQI provides more specific requirements (for example, by quantifying the amount of play materials and defining specific standards for how to reflect inclusivity and diversity in these materials).

The AQI data demonstrates that the AQI looks at deeper elements of quality than those reviewed by the current licensing process. Data from 2016 demonstrates that even though every child care centre assessed holds a license, 87 per cent of preschool programs across the board had areas for improvement, with 26 per cent of these programs having at least one area where improvements in interactions between staff and children were required. Interactions are a key component of a high-quality early learning environment.

Overlap between assessments was found to exist in two areas. The nutrition section of the Province's licensing requirements was recently updated to include similar language to the nutrition component of the AQI. Similarly, public health indicators in the AQI are similar to those inspected by Toronto Public Health. This was a request from Toronto Public Health in 2014 when the tool was revised recognizing the vulnerability of young children. However, given these overlaps, these two areas will be further reviewed to determine if they can be streamlined.

## Comments

### Feedback

For the past three years, a confidential post-assessment survey has been sent to all operators who receive AQI visits. The survey seeks feedback on the customer service provided by City staff during the assessment and feedback on how the tool supports high quality programs and professional learning needs. In 2016, approximately 300 responses were received, 85 per cent of which indicated that the AQI supports their journey towards quality improvement, with 76 per cent stating they were satisfied with their quality assessment experience.

Recognition of the value of the tool has also been received from outside of Toronto. Following City Council approval, the AQI has been adopted by the District of Thunder Bay, District of Muskoka, and Region of Durham, with the City of Toronto providing implementation support on a cost-recovery basis. The feedback from these jurisdictions since adopting the AQI has been positive, with operators seeing the AQI evaluation as a way to support the implementation of "How Does Learning Happen?", Ontario's pedagogy for the early years. The Region of Durham considers the AQI to be an enhancement of the licensing process that further ensures families have access to high quality programs.

On July 28, 2017, a consultation session with child care operators was held in order to understand their perceptions and experiences of the AQI and licensing processes, including their opinions of possible overlap. One hundred operators attended. This session was designed with the input of a Community Assessment & Improvement Advisory Committee whose membership is made up of child care operators, post-secondary institutions and other sector stakeholders. Experienced facilitators from other City divisions led small group activities and discussions about the purpose and role of the AQI and the CCEYA, the areas that each tool assessed, and how the results were used by various stakeholder groups, including operators and the City.

The consultation generated mixed results from operators. While several operators identified some similarities in the general areas assessed, most groups commented on the greater depth of detail assessed through the AQI. While some saw this as a strength of the AQI, others questioned the necessity of some of the AQI specifications.

An area of similarity commonly raised by operators focused on the recently required program statement. New CCEYA regulations require that operators have in place a program statement that describes the goals and corresponding implementation plan of key areas of programming. This program statement is reviewed for programming criteria during a CCEYA inspection. While the AQI assesses areas similar to those in the program statement, it observes the actual implementation of the program for more specific indicators of quality.

Some areas of more direct duplication were identified, with the following two areas most commonly cited:

Nutrition: language in the updated CCEYA is very similar to that of the AQI's nutrition section

Health and safety: The AQI includes Toronto Public Health requirements and standards and observes to verify that these standards are implemented

The consultation identified the administration of the AQI tool as an area for improvement, including a request to improve overall customer service by increasing the degree of supportive interactions between assessors and child care staff. Improvements in these areas will be addressed immediately, ensuring that the experience for operators is a positive one.

Operators also requested that the AQI be more flexible. In particular, some operators would like to see more leeway for centre supervisors to explain areas that do not meet expectations, and for assessors to consider situations that can negatively impact scores (e.g. the unpredictability of working with children; excluding supply staff working at the time of the visit; etc...).

Operators requested further education for parents to better understand how and when the AQI is conducted and more specific details about the actual score, including where a centre lost marks.

Many operators described the AQI document as providing helpful guidelines, and described several ways in which they are using the AQI as a resource to continuously improve the quality of their programs. Operators described the document as informing their program planning, decision making, and staff training and hiring. Some operators are also using the tool to make their own checklists and ensure consistent standards between the rooms in their centres.

The consultation also revealed a need for greater communication about how Children's Services uses the AQI scores to support operators directly, and to maintain and continuously improve the overall quality of Toronto's early learning and child care system. Most operators reportedly were unsure of how the City is using the AQI scores.

## **Next Steps**

Children's Services will undertake a review of how the AQI is implemented to address customer service concerns and to make the process a more positive experience for operators. It will also explore other possible procedural improvements while maintaining the tool's validity.

With the updated provincial legislation, the nutrition section of the AQI contains many similarities to those included in the licensing process. As this is the primary area of duplication, the nutrition section will no longer be assessed by Children's Services commencing in 2018. Similarly, there are items of intentional overlap with Toronto Public Health (TPH) standards. TPH has the legislative authority to inspect institutions including child care centres under the Health Protection and Promotion Act. During these inspections, public health inspectors may make recommendations for the

purposes of ensuring the health and safety of children. Some of the areas that TPH inspects are also included in the AQI. During a review of these items, TPH staff asked that they be maintained in the AQI to ensure sanitary practices are consistently implemented. Children's Services will explore the possibility of coordinating child care visits with TPH in order to maintain a minimum time period between visits that inspect the same items.

Some operators identified the amount of funds provided by Children's Services through per diems as a challenge to investing in improving quality. Children's Services will continue to review its funding practices with the intention of supporting reasonable costs associated with quality child care. With increasing and continued investment in child care from all orders of government, Children's Services will review its funding guidelines to ensure that it is recognizing all appropriate costs.

Some operators also expressed concern that parents may not effectively understand the AQI tool and how it works. In particular, many operators believe that some parents rely on the number published on the website without understanding the context or methodology that led to a particular rating. Children's Services will develop a communications and awareness-building strategy to address this and help parents make better use of this resource.

With the release of Ontario Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework in June 2017, the Ministry of Education committed to determining a provincial definition of quality in the early years and to "research and develop a mechanism for measuring program quality". The Province has expressed interest in working with Toronto Children's Services in these areas. Toronto Children's Services is currently participating in these discussions, with the position that the validated AQI tool inform the provincial definition and future measure of quality. This aligns with City Council's 2012 position that the City's tool be the base for province-wide quality assurance guidelines.

Overall, many changes at the provincial level are still relatively new and the full impacts of their implementation on licensing and quality are not yet known. These include Child Care and Early Years Act licensing standards, tiered licensing, and the Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework. To ensure alignment with Provincial future directions, changes to the AQI tool should be considered once the Province has finalized its definition.

In response to feedback received during the consultations, Children's Services will pursue opportunities to improve the process of how the AQI is implemented, which would continue to improve customer service for operators undergoing the assessment. Children's Services will continue to review the AQI implementation process and make improvements where needed to ensure that it works well in a rapidly changing sector.

## **Conclusion**

The AQI continues to be an important tool for advancing quality early learning and child care programs for Toronto's families, helping operators understand areas for continuous



program improvements, and ensuring that public funds are invested responsibly. The tool has been validated as a reliable measure of quality and is cost-effective to administer. It is an important tool for the City. Some areas for improvement do exist. Children's Services will continue to review the tool to ensure that it complements, but does not duplicate the purpose of licensing, and provides a high level of customer service as the sector continues to transform.

## **CONTACT**

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## **SIGNATURE**

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## **ATTACHMENTS**

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