

**Report of the Forum on  
Rural, Northern and Remote Child care  
May 5, 2011**

**Ontario Municipal Social Services Association**

**September 2011**

## Introduction

On May 5, 2011, The Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA) held a forum to explore the issues rural, northern and remote areas of Ontario face in the delivery of early learning and child care programs. The forum delved into themes that had emerged from the research OMSSA had undertaken in the development of *On the teeter-totter: Licensed child care in rural, northern and remote Ontario*<sup>1</sup> which was released at the forum. *On the teeter totter* noted that concerns had been raised for several years about the state of early learning and child care system in rural, northern and remote communities. A declining population base and insufficient funding had combined to make the delivery of early learning and child care challenging. The introduction of full day kindergarten (FDK) put further stress on these already fragile systems.

*On the teeter totter* reported the findings of a survey of Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSM) and District Social Service Administration Boards (DSSAB) regarding the specific challenges they face in managing their local child care systems. Of particular interest were changes brought about by the introduction of FDK. While the introduction of FDK has generally been seen as a positive step, the movement of children out of the child care system into the classroom has put additional pressure on a system that was already strained. The report highlighted a number of issues and key messages relating to delivery of early learning and child care in rural, northern and remote communities. The forum brought together representatives from municipal service managers, provincial government, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), rural issue experts and the child care and early learning sector to further discuss these issues in greater depth and propose solutions.

This report provides an overview of the forum, themes that were discussed and summarizes proposed next steps.

## Forum Overview

The forum combined panel discussions providing personal accounts of parents, service manager experiences, child care sector partner updates, and an interactive table-top exercise so participants could explore possible solutions.

The forum opened with remarks from Kira Heineck, OMSSA's Executive Director, and Nancy McLean an OMSSA board member and Director of Children's Services in the Algoma DSSAB. They welcomed participants and set the stage for the day by providing some background the evolution of early learning and child care over the past decade.

A service manager perspective was provided by a panel including Laura Austin (City of Kingston), Evy McDonagh (County of Huron), Beth Nowak (Cochrane DSSAB) and Dani Grenier-Ducharme (Timiskaming DSSAB). The session was moderated by Brenda Bax, the Chair of OMSSA's Early Learning and Child care Network and Manager for Child Care System Management with the City of Hamilton. The service managers described the respective

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<sup>1</sup> On the Teeter Totter: Licensed Child Care in Rural, Northern and Remote Ontario is available at the following link. (<http://www.omssa.com/lib/db2file.asp?fileid=37058>).

geographies they serve. The geographies ranged from small populations spread over large distances to smaller urban centres with connected rural areas. They also described diverse economic realities with some areas experiencing high unemployment with seasonal employment. The populations they served also varied with some service managers working with large francophone and aboriginal populations.

Erika Spek, a mother of two from Paisley, Ontario shared her experience during a follow-up panel. She described her struggle to find child care for her infant. The closest centre-based infant care she was able to find would have required driving an hour and half roundtrip which was not feasible. She considered private home care, but soon found that no viable options existed. With no family nearby, she was left with few options. Erika's experiences were reiterated in Dan Purdon's presentation. Purdon is Executive Director of Kids and Us Community Child Care and Family Education Centre in Markdale, Ontario. They are a relatively large child care provider in Bruce and Grey counties. He described the practical and financial challenges of running programs in smaller communities given the relatively small enrollment. He reported that their programs in larger towns were often more financially viable than smaller centres.

Following a break, a panel discussion moderated by Kira Heineck focused on how partnerships can help overcome some of the challenges. Marni Flaherty, from Today's Family Early Learning and Child care in Hamilton, noted the importance of home-based licensed care in rural, remote and northern areas as they can provide choice and flexibility for families. She also described the challenges providing home based care in those areas including recruiting qualified staff and a sense of isolation for providers. Petra Wolfbeiss described the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and the role they can play in advocating for improved policies. Bette Jean Crewes from the Ontario Federation of Agriculture explained their organization's interest in the issue saying that access to child care is an important support to young farm families. She also described strong rural communities as an important component of a strong province. During the follow up discussion the reality of rural, northern and remote communities was highlighted, including the points that many local politicians are newly elected in 2010 and have limited knowledge of the issues and that rural municipalities are facing shrinking tax bases so solutions need to be creative.

The final panel focused on opportunities for working within the emerging Best Start Child and Family Centres (BSCFC). The development of BSCFCs represents another phase of Dr. Pascal's vision for children's services that was adopted by the province. It sees the Centres as a way to deliver services in a more timely and seamless fashion to children and families. Sue O'Brien, Manager of Children's Services from the County of Lambton and Marsha Miller, Director of Children's Services from the Municipality of Chatham-Kent gave a presentation on how they have started to leverage these opportunities within the BSCFCs including reengineering the architecture of the early years' system within the context of the changing environment and increasing the use of data to inform planning. These changes have resulted in positive outcomes including reduced vulnerability rates, earlier intervention for children and lowering the average length of time on the wait list. They also described possible solutions moving forward including:

- Exploring consolidation of services/facilities.
- Reinstating "Child care on the Farm" project to provide more flexibility for families.

- Exploring ways to make service mobile to better support smaller or more isolated communities.
- Increase capacity for licensed home care.
- Participate in a public relations strategy to increase the market share of children attending formal child care.

Etan Diamond, OMSSA's Manager of Policy and Research, discussed some of the opportunities for greater integration of services.

The last item on the agenda was a table exercise focusing on solutions to the child care crisis in rural, northern and remote Ontario. Facilitated discussions were held at each of the tables so participants could delve more deeply into a discussion of what solutions are most appropriate and what role Best Start Child and Family System might be able to play. The findings from this exercise are reported in the next section.

The day concluded with final remarks from Kira Heineck who expressed appreciation for everyone's involvement and noted the valuable insights that had been generated during the day.

## Key themes

A number of key themes emerged relating to challenges for the provision of child care in rural, northern and remote communities.

### **System challenges of rural, northern and remote child care**

The problems of providing children's services have been documented for many years. Many communities have too few child care spaces for the population. In some communities, declining children's populations make it hard to sustain services. The introduction of FDK has brought these issues into high relief.

### **Closing the doors**

Some communities are losing child care services. The movement of four and five year olds to full day learning has meant that some providers are struggling to remain viable. The investment in retrofitting to serve younger children is just not feasible for many. The struggles exist in both centre-based and licensed home care. In some cases, communities are at risk of losing their only child care spaces.

### **Where will families go?**

With fewer options for licensed care families may have few choices but to turn to informal and unlicensed care. The closure of child care facilities can have direct impact on local economies as employees lose jobs and the businesses no longer consume local services or pay business taxes. The effects are farther reaching, however, as the lack of high quality, affordable child care can make a community less attractive to new residents and businesses. In other words, child care needs to be seen as a part of community infrastructure and a support to economic prosperity.

## **Funding**

The approach to funding child care services needs to be re-examined. With a small population base from which to draw, many communities have too few children to support the full costs of licensed child care services under the current approach. There are basic costs to running a centre regardless of the number of children enrolled. Centres require a degree of stable operational funding to ensure they are viable; in many places they cannot rely solely on parent enrolment fees to operate.

## **Local Flexibility**

Each community has different challenges and different resources. Creative solutions in one community may not work in another. Greater flexibility needs to be given to service managers to develop unique approaches that leverage their unique community assets.

## **Next steps: Solutions to child care challenges**

Building on the solutions described in *On the Teeter Totter*, the following approaches were identified to address the challenges.

### **Some concrete solutions to increase centre viability, include:**

- Provide base operational funding for centres.
- Increase access to free or low-rent spaces in schools and other community spaces.
- Help parents with accessibility challenges by, for example, promoting carpooling or offering free rural bus or gas vouchers.
- Ensure flexibility with legislation and make changes to the Day Nurseries Act.
- Broad eligibility by revising the scale and criteria for income testing.
- Change the Day Nurseries Act in terms of allowing more flexibility of age ratios.

### **Some concrete solutions to support licensed home child care, include:**

- Change staffing ratios, making it worthwhile to stay open and licensed.
- Change the restrictions on the number of young children who may be cared for in home-based care (Eliminate the 2-under-2 rule. Make it 3-under-3).
- Expand capacity to care for school-age children before and after school.

### **Some concrete solutions to staffing challenges, include:**

- Offer more competitive salaries to attract better qualified staff.
- Offer a northern-rural incentive to attract and keep local staff.
- Support full-time employment opportunities as much as possible.
- Promote ECE training to high school students and adults.

### **Some concrete solutions to building and infrastructure challenges, include:**

- Provide capital dollars for renovations and relocations.
- Support the operational costs of buildings.
- Increase health and safety funding to address ongoing facilities and material issues.

**Promote and market** the benefits of licensed child care. Families need more information to understand the benefits to children, including school readiness and developmental benefits. Additionally, licensed child care needs to be understood as an important part of community infrastructure. Roads, bridges, schools and health care are all understood to be part of the lifeblood of a community. Licensed child care needs to be seen in the same light.

### **Final thoughts**

The various perspectives presented at the forum emphasized that child care is in crisis in rural, northern and remote communities. The problems faced by services managers, services providers and parents are not new. The introduction of full day learning, while recognized to be beneficial for children, has made them more apparent. The outlook, however, is far from dim. Forum participants identified some valuable concrete next steps. Some are relatively easy to implement and others are much more complex requiring funding and legislative change. Moving forward will require all participants in the system to work closely together to ensure that Ontario families and communities benefit from the early learning and child care services they so badly need.

OMSSA continues to explore the challenges and barriers to successful rural, northern and remote service delivery as well as work with our members and partners to develop innovative and practical solutions. We look forward to sharing these with decision makers and all orders of government in the coming months and years.