



BCGEU submission July 18, 2008
Response to
“Expanding Early Learning in British Columbia for Children Aged 3-5”
Early Childhood Learning Agency

The BC Government and Service Employees’ Union (BCGEU) membership includes early childhood educators and child care workers in a variety of settings across the province. Many family-based child care providers are special associate members of our union. The BCGEU is also an active advocate for a comprehensive publicly-funded child care system in our province.

The provincial government’s Early Childhood Learning Agency (ECLA) is seeking responses to its consultation paper *“Expanding Early Learning in British Columbia for Children Aged 3-5”* and has asked four specific questions:

- 1) *What are your thoughts on full school day kindergarten for five-year-olds?*
- 2) *What about parent choice for full school day pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds?*
- 3) *What about parent choice for full school day pre-kindergarten programs for three-year-olds?*
- 4) *What do you think are the most important factors to consider in expanding early learning programs in British Columbia?*

Our starting point in responding to these questions is to place them in the context of the crisis in early learning and child care services in BC.

There are too few child care spaces, which means thousands of children and their families are on long waiting lists. Wages for early learning and child care workers are low, resulting in serious recruitment and retention problems. Parent fees are high and this either means many parents can only find care that is informal, and not learning-based, or one parent, usually the mother, must stay out of the workforce altogether because child care costs are prohibitive. This leaves working families without options, has negative effects on the labour market, and short-changes children who miss out on early learning opportunities.

Expanding to full day early learning school-based programs is only one part of the solution. The provincial government must make a commitment to building an integrated system of early learning and child care in a variety of settings. The commitment must be backed up by sustained, long-term public funding, and by policies that guarantee there is a space for every child. The provincial government must also put in place a transparent long-term planning process that includes child care advocates, early childhood educators, teachers and other education professionals.



Building an integrated early learning and child care system will have far-reaching implications for working families, and particularly women, by increasing family incomes, stimulating job growth particularly in small and rural communities, and supporting children and expanding their growth and development.

What follows are the BCGEU's responses to the specific questions posed in the Early Learning Agency consultation paper.

“What are your thoughts on full school day kindergarten for five-year-olds?”

The BCGEU supports full school day kindergarten for five-year-olds. Many five-year-olds enter the school system having already participated in early childhood education programs for a full day. But working families need child care in the periods before and after regular school hours and these needs must be addressed as part of any new plan. Awkward gaps in child care throughout the day cause disruptions for children and complications for parents and providers alike. It may require a significant provincial investment in staffing and school facilities in order to provide full school day kindergarten province-wide.

We will need to investigate effective and accountable ways to involve non-profit centres and family providers in the delivery of before- and after-school services.

Many existing providers are concerned about whether they will have a place in any new government program for early learning and child care that is school based. The government needs to clearly explain their vision of the role for non-profit centres, and family home providers.

This government must also clearly explain how the expansion of kindergarten will affect existing child care providers. In many cases, providers rely on having children with a mix of ages to fund their operations. It is not clear how financially viable it will be to provide care for five-year-olds if they only attend for short periods of time before and after kindergarten. It is important that the government does not unintentionally ruin some child care providers during any transition. Government should explain measures it will take to manage and support transition.

The consultation paper indicates that in some jurisdictions, kindergarten programs run for the full school day, but for only a few days per week. We believe this would cause problems for working families and providers and urge the government to move to full day, full week kindergarten for five-year-olds.



“What about parent choice for full-school-day pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds?”

“What about parent choice for full school day pre-kindergarten for three-year-olds?”

The BCGEU supports full day pre-kindergarten programs for both three- and four-year-olds, where enrolment is optional. Similar issues exist with early learning and child care opportunities for three- and four-year-olds, including the need to invest in public school expansion and refurbishment.

Opportunities must be real, which means programs must be as accessible for parents in small communities and rural areas as they are for parents in urban centres. There should be spaces for all children who need them, regardless of special needs or family income. In the best instance, pre-kindergarten programs, like the school system would be funded through the tax system, and not be fee-based, but the BCGEU would support nominal daily parent fees similar to those in place for the Quebec child care system where parents contribute \$7 per day per child.

Curriculum must be age-appropriate for three- and four-year-olds and should be delivered by qualified early childhood educators. Early childhood educators are concerned that in any shift to school based programs, their credentials, skills and experience will be marginalized. As with five-year-olds, the need for early learning and child care placements extends beyond the regular school hours and the government should explain how it will manage the impact on before- and after-school care, and how existing providers will be supported through any transition.

Our union is concerned that parent “choice” not lead to the endorsement of a commercialized system where public funds are diverted from public institutions, community based non-profits and home providers to for-profit commercial contractors.

“What do you think are the most important factors to consider in expanding early learning programs in British Columbia?”

Early learning and child care cannot be separated – both help children develop a wide range of social, emotional and learning skills. Any new full school day kindergarten or pre-kindergarten programs must take into account the early learning and child care crisis in BC, and the needs of working families. The separation of responsibilities between ministries should not obstruct the building of a responsive and integrated child care and early learning system.

The paper does not address infant and toddler child care, but this should be integrated into the solutions and planning process for three-, four- and five-year-olds. Opportunities for children with special needs should also be reviewed. Out-of-school care for children under the age of 12 also needs to be addressed, in order to build a comprehensive system.



Inevitably, any significant expansion of early learning and child care programs will require wage increases for early childhood educators and child care workers, otherwise it will be impossible to recruit the professional staff needed.

Finally, funding must be predictable, and the plans for staging and implementation should be transparent. The provincial government must formally involve stakeholders in the planning process and the transition to an expanded, integrated system of early learning and care.

We appreciate the opportunity to participate in the public consultation on this issue and look forward to the report.