

OMSSA's vision for the Best Start Child and Family System

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Introduction

In his 2009 Early Learning Advisor report, *With our Best Future in Mind*, Charles Pascal described his vision for an integrated Prenatal-to-12 Child and Family Service System. This system would be funded through the Ministry of Education, managed by the Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs) and District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs), and would have Best Start Child and Family Centres to provide a range of programs and services to families and children in local communities.

Since the publication of that report, Dr. Pascal and Minister of Children and Youth Services Laurel Broten have continued to explore and refine this vision for the provision of integrated services for families and children.

This report from the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA) contributes to this work in two important ways:

1. We recommend that the conversation shift from talking about Best Start Child and Family Centres to a larger Best Start Child and Family **System**. This change in language allows for flexibility in the provision of a range of programs and services to families and children beyond those that are offered in a physical “centre.” It allows us to conceive of the functions being provided as a process and does not limit them to being place-based. This shift to systems thinking is reflected in the Early Learning Advisor’s report.
2. We recommend that CMSMs and DSSABs be formally designated as service system managers, within a province-wide framework, for the Best Start Child and Family System. This recommendation is consistent with the role noted in the Early Learning Advisor’s report, and is conditional upon the provision of transitional funding. As service system managers, CMSMs and DSSABs currently are responsible for local service system planning, resource allocation and reallocation, accountability, and quality assurance.

OMSSA is the professional organization representing human services staff in CMSMs and DSSABs at the municipal level in Ontario. The association’s purpose is to enhance its members’ capacity to plan, manage, and deliver quality human services to best meet the needs of their communities. Over the last few years, OMSSA has developed a series of resources for our members and partners in the early learning and child care sector for Ontario. These include:

- *Full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-old children: Building a stronger early learning and child care system in Ontario* (October 2008)
- *Hand in hand: How the province and municipalities can create the best early learning and child care service system for Ontario* (March 2009)
- Response to the report, *With our Best Future in Mind* (July 2009)
- *Report on the Forum on Best Start Child and Family Centres* (March 2010)
- *Tools for Integrated Early Years Service Planning* (June 2010)
- An Early Years Capacity-building project for CMSMs and DSSABs (Spring 2011)

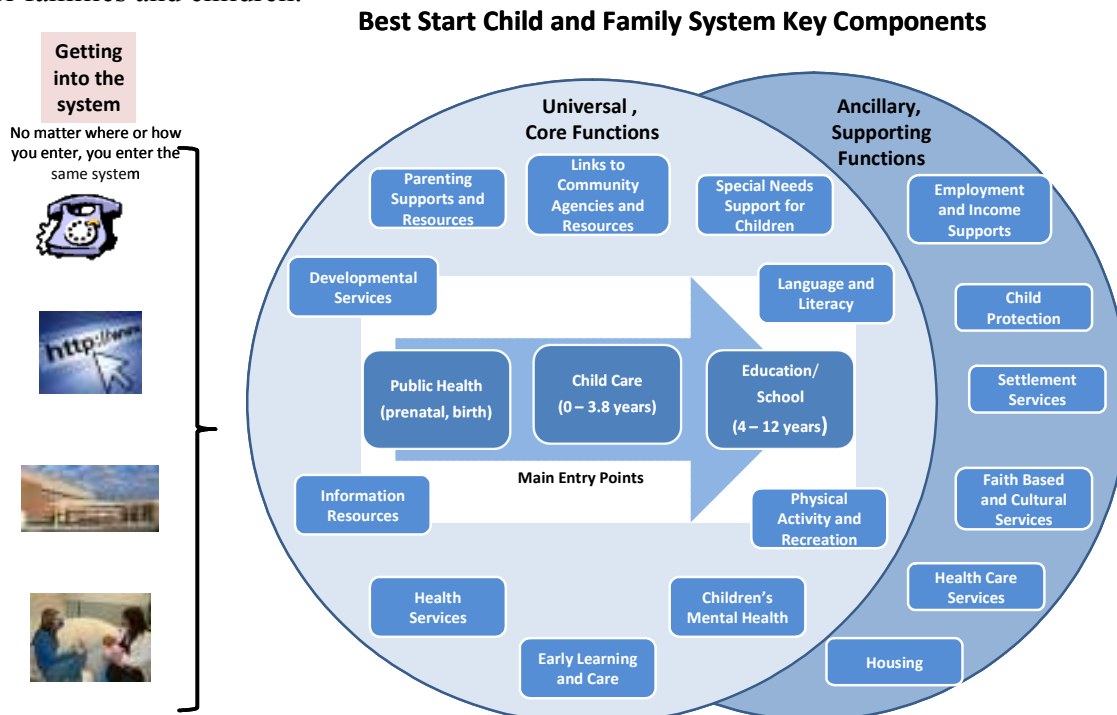
This report draws on these products by providing an overview of OMSSA’s position on the Best Start Child and Family System, with an emphasis on a vision for the system, governance, and potential implementation issues.

Best Start Child and Family System: A Vision

Each community across Ontario will have a different starting point in moving toward the implementation of a Best Start Child and Family System. We do know, however, that communities today have a mix of programs for families and children offered by multiple agencies, thus creating a patchwork of services that are fragmented from each other, funded in different ways, and difficult to access. These programs were created at different times to meet particular needs and rarely were developed with the broader system in mind. In fact, a family today who has to access services often is forced to deal with multiple agencies and repeat their story to different intake workers and service providers. From the eyes of a parent, there is no single “service system.”

This must change. OMSSA’s vision presented in this paper outlines where communities must head. We provide a vision for a system that is family-centred, universal, and seamless for families and children. This ideal vision supports a community-based development of a system and must acknowledge and address the unique circumstances in remote service delivery.

The Best Start Child and Family System will bring together and integrate a range of universal, core functions for families and children from prenatal-to-12 years of age. These core functions must be affordable, accessible, inclusive, and culturally appropriate to enhance outcomes for all families and children. Core functions will be available to everyone. In addition, ancillary, supporting functions will be provided, based on identified community needs and priorities (see visual presented below). In other words, the Best Start Child and Family System must be universal, though targeted when needed, to address better outcomes for families and children.



Universal, Core Functions

A number of primary services act as main entry points and anchors to the system. Public health, child care, and education/school, are the main entry points to the system across the lifecycle continuum of children, from before they are born through 12 years of age. Public health functions are a main entry point before and after a child is born, child care is a main entry point for children up to 4 years old, and education/school is a main entry point for children aged 4 to 12 years.

Universal, core functions available in the Best Start Child and Family System include:

- Early learning and child care
- Health services
- Information resources
- Developmental services
- Parenting supports and resources
- Links to community agencies and resources
- Special needs support for children
- Language and literacy
- Physical activity and recreation
- Children's mental health

Ancillary, Supporting Functions

The Best Start Child and Family System will also provide a range of ancillary, supporting functions based on identified community needs and priorities. The provision of these functions will vary from community to community and neighbourhood to neighbourhood.

Ancillary, supporting functions might include, but are not limited to employment and income supports, child protection, settlement services, faith based and cultural services, health care services, and housing.

Getting in the System

Families and children will be able to access the Best Start Child and Family System through multiple points (for example: phone, internet, physical centre, outreach¹). No matter where or how families and children choose to enter, they will enter the same system of integrated services. All service providers working in the BSCFS should be system navigators, helping families and children identify and access the programs and services they require. Every person working in the system should say, "I work for the system, not an agency."

Values Underlying the System

In addition to the functions noted above, a Best Start Child and Family System (BSCFS) must encompass a culture that supports families and children. This system, and all of the players in it, must have as their central focus the provision of enriching experiences for children and families. The values which support this culture include:

- **Universal:** All children and families have access to the BSCFS, maintaining the principle of universality, and licensed quality child care is provided broadly as a core function to support the development of children and early learning, and not solely as a support to employment.
- **High Quality:** The BSCFS provides flexible and high quality early learning and child care experiences. There is a robust drive to ensure the BSCFS meets high quality standards and is based on best practice (quality assurance).

¹ The outreach function must be embedded in community leaders as well.

- **Accessible and inclusive:** All core functions in the BSCFS are accessible, inclusive, and culturally appropriate. For those services where families must pay a fee, those fees must be as minimal as possible.
- **Seamless:** The BSCFS provides a seamless, predictable, and stable environment for families and children.
- **Family-centred:** Families and children have input into the services provided through the BSCFS and the system reflects their needs.
- **Accountable:** Service providers in the system are accountable to each other, the system manager, and the broader community. Financial accountability is in place between service providers in the system and the CMSM/DSSAB. Every person working in the BSCFS is a system navigator.

Other Aspects of the Best Start Child and Family System

- The Best Start Child and Family System must be normalized. It should become a brand that is well known, with everyone in the community and every single service that touches a child being well aware of what it does and how to access programs and services.
- The Best Start Child and Family System must be built on the principles of being family-centred, providing a timely response, providing services and resources people want and need, having knowledgeable system navigators, being available when needed, and providing services in a helpful and respectful way.
- The Best Start Child and Family System must be seamless. There must be a seamless **continuum of services** for the lifecycle of the child, from prenatal-to-12 years of age. There must be a seamless **day** for each child from birth to 12 years old. It must be a seamless **experience** for the child and family using a service within the system (for example, there should be “one service” for a child requiring speech and language supports from birth to 12 years of age).
- Common language must be used throughout the BSCFS, no matter at what point families and children access the system.
- Core functions in the BSCFS must support and promote developmental health, including language and literacy development, and cultural and linguistic competency.
- The Best Start Child and Family System must be built upon an evaluative framework. Two sets of outcomes, with key performance indicators,² must be delineated prior to the development of the Best Start Child and Family System. The first set of outcomes must be high-level, province-wide outcomes developed jointly by the province and CMSMs and DSSABs. The second set of outcomes must be established locally through a community consultation process facilitated by CMSMs and DSSABs.

² Key performance indicators are critical for measuring the performance of the BSCFS over time. Community strengths and needs are quantifiable using existing common measurement tools to make comparisons and assess achievements across communities and across municipalities. The role of the service system manager is to provide the supporting data that inform the services required to increase child and family outcomes in a community.

Establishing outcomes is an important first step in the development of the Best Start Child and Family System. The delineation of outcomes helps to identify which functions need to be available in the BSCFS. The following table provides an example of potential outcomes and the functions which would support the achievement of these outcomes at different stages in the child's life (from prenatal to 12 years of age).

Best Start Child and Family System: Key Functions Supporting the Outcomes

Outcomes	Prenatal/birth	Birth to 3.8 years	4 to 7 years	8 to 12 years
Family is empowered, knowledgeable and able to make informed decisions	Health services			
	Information resources			
		Early learning/child care	Education/school	
Family has a support network	Health services			
		Physical education/recreation		
		Language/literacy		
		Parenting supports/resources		
Family is connected to and engaged in their neighbourhood		Physical education/recreation		
		Language/literacy		
		Early learning/child care		
Child is supported in his/her healthy development and receives supports and activities to help to meet developmental milestones	Health services			
		Physical education/recreation		
		Early learning/child care		
Family has access to the services they need	All core and ancillary functions			
Family has access to a range of high-quality, licensed, affordable, and accessible child care options		Early learning/child care		
Family has access to early identification services	Health services			
	All core and ancillary functions			

Governance

As service system managers working for municipal councils and district services boards, we agree with the Early Learning Advisor's report that CMSMs and DSSABs are ideally positioned to provide leadership in the area of service planning and management, within a province-wide framework, for the Best Start Child and Family System. The municipal service manager can lead and facilitate the development of local plans and service standards, and can manage horizontal community stakeholder models of engagement. With an ongoing designated stewardship role for the Best Start Networks, service managers can ensure that provincial and locally-agreed-upon frameworks and priorities are adhered to.

We note that CMSMs and DSSABs do not necessarily need to operate or deliver services within the BSCFS, but there is a clear role for them in leading the service planning and management of this new system, based on shared, community stakeholder ownership.

CMSMs and DSSABs are distinguished from other local agencies and administrative bodies by the presence of a strong government-to-government relationship between local councils and the province, and a broader accountability to local citizens. Service managers are not transfer payment agencies, receiving money from the provincial government to deliver a specific service. Rather, they work with and are accountable to elected municipal councils who are, in turn, accountable to local communities. Service system managers operate within an established system of processes, approval, authority, and accountability. CMSMs and DSSABs also play an active role in partnering with the province to manage Ontario's human service system.

OMSSA has long argued that any revamping of the early learning environment must retain a central role for municipal service system managers. This includes the Best Start Child and Family System. The Early Learning Advisor's report, *With Our Best Future in Mind*, comes out firmly in support of municipal service system managers, who are to lead the system while working in partnership with boards of education and community Best Start partners. This report states that municipal authorities will:

Be "...leader among leaders working with school boards and Best Start partners to develop Early Years Service Plans that would include outcomes, benchmarks, timelines, and accountability measures."

"...provide systems management for a network of Best Start Child and Family Centres."

Municipal service system managers also play a key role in human services integration. Child care and children's services represent one component of the broader basket of human services for which municipalities are responsible. This positions CMSMs and DSSABs well to develop and integrate the Best Start Child and Family System with other community and municipal plans. The Province's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy is reflective of this shift in perspective to human services integration. OMSSA believes that a system of services that is coordinated, seamless, and tailored to the needs of people can help to maximize their potential, enhance their quality of life, and contribute to their community.

Ontario's municipal service system managers have a history of successfully managing human services with shared accountability with both the provincial and federal governments. More than 10 years ago, the province designated the CMSMs and DSSABs to be service system managers

for children's services and social housing, and gave them key service provider roles in the employment and income services sector. In 2006, CMSMs and DSSABs were charged with implementing Best Start, which consisted of an unconditional grant to address access to child care. Through the Best Start initiative, CMSMs and DSSABs demonstrated strong community leadership and the capacity to complete this work through the development of Best Start Networks, the integration of sectors, and broad systems planning.

In the 2008 Provincial Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review (PMFSDR), the Ontario government recognized municipalities as an order of government with a demonstrated knowledge and experience in integrated socioeconomic planning and development. The review acknowledged the role municipalities play in the funding and planning for shared services delivered at the local level, and set out expectations for a new accountability framework that "will apply to services for which the two orders of government share accountability." Most recently, in 2010 municipal service managers were given the lead on developing a community-based housing and homelessness plan.

The Best Start Child and Family System is about horizontal policy and system changes. To achieve success, the province must, therefore, formally designate CMSMs and DSSABs as the responsible authority for the Best Start Child and Family System and must embed this authority horizontally across all legislations governing children's services. By having this legislative responsibility for the management and planning of the new system, service managers will have greater opportunities to further align and integrate children's services into an integrated community-based human services plan—as required by the PMFSDR.

CMSMs and DSSABs are the most appropriate administrative bodies for leading and overseeing the realization of the Best Start Child and Family System for other reasons as well.

- CMSMs and DSSABs are the level of government closest to the communities they serve. They are accountable to local taxpayers and they operate within an established system of processes, approval, authority and accountability.
- Service managers provide a single governance structure necessary to ensure consistent implementation of the program. As a local level of government they have the authority to—*they are mandated to*—give priority to the basic needs of communities and to promote the social and economic development of the community. CMSMs and DSSABs know the needs of the families in their communities, and the scope, complexity, and often fragmentation of local services.
- CMSMs and DSSABs are equity agents. Their involvement is guided by social need, delivering programs in areas where many local service providers will not.
- CMSMs and DSSABs have the ability to maximize resources and balance provincial priorities to meet the needs of the community.
- CMSMs and DSSABs are required to be impartial in their social planning decisions. They have a strong understanding of community and service provider needs and increasingly work within an outcome-based framework.

A successful implementation of the Best Start Child and Family System must include a sustainable funding framework jointly developed by the province and service managers and

should include allocations for planning and integration, similar to those provided under Best Start.

Municipal service managers and the province have a vested interest in creating an integrated BSCFS. To realize this vision, CMSMs and DSSABs require sufficient resources to make such a significant change. Without the backing of full, sustainable funding, the Best Start Child and Family System will be subject to competition for scarce local resources. Moreover, funding must be provided at the system level and not at the agency level.

We note that the savings from systems reengineering alone will be insufficient to sustain the system. Rather, funding sustainability must include:

1. A consistent, stable, and indexed, multi-year funding envelope based on a consistent and equitable formula that reflects true local costs of services.
2. Capital funding to expand the system to meet local needs.
3. Consistent, indexed funding to support appropriate wages for system staff.
4. Sufficient funds to provide affordable and easily accessible services created based on community needs.
5. Flexibility in allocating funds according to varying local needs, especially those in rural and northern areas with unique situations to address.

The success of Best Start rested in large part on the funding authority that CMSMs and DSSABs had within their communities. They had the ability to lead a process that established local priorities, set outcome targets, determined resource allocation, and imposed quality standards. Building on this success, this is what must occur with the Best Start Child and Family System. Service managers must be given the funding and planning authority to lead the implementation process in ways that address local needs.

Potential Implementation Issues

The Best Start Child and Family System will provide the infrastructure necessary to create an integrated Prenatal-to-12 Child and Family Service System. The province must recognize that this will entail a broad systems change. The Best Start Child and Family System is not a traditional service delivery model and will require policy and system changes to support its implementation.

Some of the areas which need particular focus in the implementation of the Best Start Child and Family System include:

- **Strong foundation:** The BSCFS must be built on a strong, sustainable, well-funded, high-quality early learning and child care system for children birth to 3.8 years of age, with boards of education operating full-day kindergarten that includes an extended-day option for 12 months of the year.
- **Appropriate financial resources:** CMSMs and DSSABs need to be provided with appropriate financial resources for planning and implementing the BSCFS (see comments about a sustainable funding framework above). Without provincial recognition of the inherent costs associated with good community planning, the quality and comprehensiveness of the plans across the province will be compromised. There are also municipal, financial

dimensions to this change. System re-engineering will have budgetary implications for municipal governments, as they provide services that will be a part of the BSCFS (such as recreation, library services, and child care services). The provincial government should work closely with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) and the City of Toronto to ensure that this dimension is addressed.

- **DSSAB governance:** Because of the unique governance structures of DSSABs, and current powers available to DSSABs under the DSSAB Act, there is policy work to be done so as to give DSSABs the same capacity as CMSMs to fulfill their service system management role as effectively as possible. We note the work of the Northern Ontario Service Delivery Association (NOSDA) on the particular issues facing DSSABs within this new Best Start Child and Family System.
- **Local flexibility:** OMSSA has long advocated for a high degree of flexibility in developing models that are appropriate for local communities. This is important in the implementation phase of the Best Start Child and Family System. CMSMs and DSSABs must be able to make decisions responsive to local needs and have funding streams that allow them to invest in a standard menu of prenatal-to-12 services, tailored to the particular circumstances of their local community. They must also have flexibility in determining the delivery model in their communities.
- **Rural, northern, and remote areas:** There must be equity across the province. More resources will be needed for rural, northern, and remote areas to ensure that broad outcomes for families and children are achieved in all parts of Ontario. Rural, northern, and remote areas need a comprehensive solution that does not base its funding solely on the numbers of children in the system. There must be a provincial recognition in policy and in funding that service delivery in rural, northern, and remote areas is simply more expensive.
- **Public policy:** There needs to be a shift in public policy from one in which the provincial government provides universal support to children when in school (from age 4) to one in which the provincial government provides universal support to families and children starting at the prenatal stage. CMSMs and DSSABs can make this shift happen on the ground, if provided with the right tools.
- **Accountability of ancillary functions:** Functional accountability to the CMSM and DSSAB must be established for those ancillary, supporting functions in the BSCFS that receive funding from other provincial ministries (such as Ministry of Health or Ministry of Community and Social Services). There must be a mutual statement from all levels of government mandating this level of accountability. Involvement cannot happen solely through established relationships.
- **Clear roles and responsibilities:** The roles and responsibilities of the different levels of government, community groups, and service providers involved in this new system must be clearly articulated.

Finally, the Best Start Child and Family System should be phased in across the province, beginning in a number of communities representing a range in their level of readiness - in those communities where there is clear leadership on this issue, a community willingness to be a pioneer, and in those communities that are less ready. This range will allow for lessons

to be learned and shared, with CMSMs and DSSABs learning from and mentoring each other, and OMSSA acting as the vehicle to make this happen.

Many Best Start and other networks operating across the province have succeeded in building a solid foundation of seamless service delivery within their own communities. Their work, time, and effort should be built upon and championed, where appropriate.

Final Thoughts

OMSSA is excited about the opportunities that lay before us. A decade ago, municipalities were entrusted with the responsibility of managing Ontario's human service systems. A decade ago, we were that much further away from an integrated service system for children and families. We are confident that CMSMs and DSSABs can bring Ontario closer to this reality, through their community leadership role in the Best Start Child and Family System.

Communities across Ontario are diverse. By working together, through OMSSA, we are enthusiastic about the opportunity for municipal service managers to continue to be champions and to lead community processes which result in better outcomes for Ontario's families and children.

OMSSA resources:

1. *Full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-old children: Building a stronger early learning and child care system in Ontario*
<http://www.omssa.com/lib/db2file.asp?file=35384>
2. *With our best future in mind: Implementing early learning in Ontario*, A summary and comment from OMSSA
<http://www.omssa.com/lib/db2file.asp?fileid=36177>
3. *Hand in hand: How the province and municipalities can create the best early learning and child care service system for Ontario:*
<http://www.omssa.com/singlepage.asp?itemcode=OMSSA-HANDINHAND>
4. *A Report on the Joint Forum on Best Start Child and Family Centres*
<http://www.omssa.com/lib/db2file.asp?file=37043>
5. OMSSA tools for integrated early years service planning:
<http://www.omssa.com/singlepage.asp?itemcode=EARLY-YEARS-PLANNING>