

# Building our Best Future

Realizing the Vision of Ontario  
Best Start Child and Family Centres

**AN UPDATE**



## **A MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH SERVICES**

As the Minister of Children and Youth Services, I am deeply committed to realizing the vision of Best Start, an ambitious, long-term strategy designed to transform Ontario's approach to early childhood development, and ensure that every child in this province is given the best possible start in life. This is a vast, long-term undertaking that involves the true integration of dozens of interlocking children's services, funded and administered across several ministries, and offered locally and regionally by hundreds of independent agencies throughout the province.

This update describes our progress in developing a framework to guide the development of an integrated child and family services system through the development of Ontario Best Start Child and Family Centres, an initiative noted in Dr. Charles Pascal's 2009 report *With Our Best Future In Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*.

This update is also the result of recent conversations Dr. Pascal and I have had with parents and community and provincial leaders. It provides a summary of issues and ideas arising and provides some key next steps informed by the many individuals and organizations whose voices are reflected in this brief update. I look forward their ongoing advice as we move forward with this critically important initiative.



Laurel Broten  
Minister of Children and Youth Services

## **A MESSAGE FROM THE PREMIER'S SPECIAL ADVISOR ON EARLY LEARNING**

Governments, service providers and experts around the world have envisioned the concept of a truly integrated system of children's services for many decades.

I know from the very extensive consultation process undertaken for the early learning report that there is remarkable support for moving forward – and considerable talent – among service providers and local and provincial child and family service leaders. Nonetheless, my report provided only a general vision and notion of how to implement this concept. As a result, there's still a need to clarify some of the basics. For example, while hubs and other examples of high levels of collaboration in a community among providers can be a pre-requisite for true integration, they are not the destination. Too many still imagine that the "centre" concept means "one stop shopping", and that all services would be located in a single place rather than the more virtual "no wrong door" notion that means when a family enters a single agency, it enters every agency.

The recent outreach the Minister has led and the ideas and actions arising as a result that are described in this update, are critical to getting both the framework and implementation process done well. Getting it right is key. We have waited a long time to move deliberately toward a system that works for children and families. I am confident that we are moving in the right direction, through this thorough and carefully considered approach, and that we will indeed achieve our shared vision of the best future for Ontario's children, and all Ontarians.



Charles Pascal  
The Premier's Special Advisor on Early Learning

# Building our Best Future

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### About Best Start

Best Start, announced in 2004, describes the government's vision of an Ontario in which children are ready and eager to achieve success in school by the time they start Grade One. Best Start is a universal strategy. It is intended to support the optimal development of all children, while remaining mindful of the needs of vulnerable children.

A key goal of Best Start is to bring community services together in a comprehensive, flexible, integrated and seamless way so that children and their parents can access the services they need in a timely and effective fashion. As a result of Best Start, more and more communities have improved coordination and collaboration with greater linkages and better information for families. We must now take steps to move beyond collaboration and toward the fundamental changes necessary to achieve the goals of Best Start through the development of Ontario Best Start Child and Family Centres (Best Start Centres).

### The key challenge: integration

There are many programs and services available throughout the province that meet the specific needs of children and their families. However, they have typically been developed in isolation, and have not necessarily been connected to other services in their communities. In addition, these services have their own eligibility criteria, intake processes, funding streams and governance approaches to planning for and providing services.

As a result, parents are not always aware of the services available in the community, and do not always know where to go to get the help or information they need. Likewise, service organizations themselves may not be linked in any cohesive or consistent way. This approach is inefficient but, equally important, potentially confusing and frustrating for parents, who often have to "navigate" the system on their own. Providing children and families with timely and effective supports means we have to address the current fragmentation, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, community by community, and region by region, and move toward a provincially coordinated child and family system. Community leaders need and want guidance regarding what integration really means. They also need key benchmarks and indicators that they can use to measure their progress. Section four of

this update makes note of upcoming working papers that will provide insight into various aspects of integration.

Our progress at the community level also depends on adopting a horizontal approach to serving children and families within and across the government to overcome the fragmentation that exists at the provincial level.



## WHAT'S BEEN DONE SO FAR

### Community-government partnerships

Significant work has been done through community-government partnerships to explore and identify the opportunities and barriers we will encounter as we move toward implementation of the Best Start Centres concept.

For example, Best Start demonstration communities were identified to implement the Best Start vision at a more accelerated pace than would be possible province-wide. Through their work, we learned that integration is hard work and takes time and deeper understanding regarding systems change know-how is key. We also learned that some structures within the current service delivery model represent significant barriers to integration, and are difficult to overcome at the community level. Importantly, Best Start demonstration communities showed that progress toward integration was often the result of strong local leadership and trusting and respectful relationships among service providers.

It is important to note that, as part of this first phase of Best Start, all communities have made some progress toward integration. Ontario communities are no longer delivering programs and services in complete isolation.

### Ontario Best Start Child and Family Centres

More recently, *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario* made recommendations for moving Ontario towards a seamless, integrated service system for children and families.

This provided high level direction on the role and functions of Best Start Centres and an overarching plan to offer timely and effective supports for parents and caregivers that would in turn support their children's early development.

The need for an early years system has resonated with service providers and municipalities. While widespread understanding of the practical implications of an integrated system is still a work in progress, some communities have taken very promising steps toward integration of services on their own, using existing resources.

## Recent consultations: what we heard

A core component of the ministry's initial work on the Best Start Centres concept has been connecting and consulting with a wide variety of individuals, communities and stakeholder groups. Building on the extensive consultations undertaken to develop *With Our Best Future in Mind*, we hosted discussions with stakeholders, service professionals, administrators, and parents to deepen understanding about how this concept goes well beyond coordination and collaboration across service providers.

These groups have provided invaluable advice by describing their experiences and their vision for a stronger child and family services system:

- An **External Reference Group** comprised of leaders and innovative thinkers from across the early years sector met for strategic discussions to inform the development of the Best Start Centres concept. In addition, an **Internal Reference Group** of senior provincial public servants representing some ten ministries have been meeting to enable more effective government-wide collaboration. These groups have been instrumental in shaping the discussion around integration and the Best Start Centres concept. They remain available to provide future guidance for the development of framework elements.
- **Site Consultations** were conducted in five Ontario communities with over 200 participants. Sessions were held in Hamilton, Sudbury, Toronto, Clinton and Casselman and participants included parents, services professionals, administrators and local government representatives.
- Through the **ministry website**, we received over 800 submissions from parents, services professionals and interested stakeholders.
- An **Aboriginal Circle** was convened to discuss the challenges and opportunities in meeting the needs of Aboriginal families.

We also received direct input from hundreds of individuals and organizations during our community visits, through letters and position papers, and by hosting **expert workshops** on governance and outcomes to start informing the work on a provincial framework.



## What parents and caregivers told us

Parents and caregivers of children provided feedback through site consultations and through the ministry website. Over 80 % of online feedback was submitted by parents or caregivers. They told us:

### 1. They find it difficult to navigate the current set of programs and services for young children.

Parents reported that the current set of programs and services can be “a confusing maze”. Some parents suggested adding “navigator” or “system coordinator” positions within communities to help parents navigate current services. Other parents understand that “navigation” should be embedded within a proper system.

### 2. They rely on internet resources for information about programs and services.

Many parents reported using the internet to find information about programs and services for their children. However, information on some websites is out of date and unreliable. Online information about provincially funded programs and services needs to be accurate and up-to-date.

### 3. They have serious concerns about waiting for services.

Many parents reported having to wait to gain access to early years services for their children. Parents reported that waiting for services was stressful and they were concerned that waiting was harmful to children’s development.

### 4. They want a more streamlined and efficient service experience.

Parents only “want to tell their story once” to gain access to all of the programs and services they need for their children. Getting an assessment or a screening when they have a concern about their child’s health or development should be easy to do, without multiple waitlists.

“Sometimes it’s just overwhelming to have to call all around and fill in a bunch of forms when you’re dead tired or have limited time. Sometimes you just don’t know where to go or what questions to ask.”

*Parent of a 4 month old child, in an urban community in Central Ontario*

**5. They want an easily identifiable place (such as a physical centre or a website) where they know they can go to get the help they need.**

Parents reported not always knowing where to go to get help about their child's development. They want a clearly labeled, well-advertised place – in their community and on the internet – where they know they can go to get information or to access programs and services.

**6. They want consistent services no matter who they are or where they live.**

Parents in rural and northern locations told us that some services are unavailable in their communities. Parents in these communities felt there should be equitable services in all communities. Parents in Aboriginal and Francophone communities also highlighted the need to ensure that all services are culturally appropriate for Aboriginal and Francophone families.

### ***Brayden's story***

My son is developmentally delayed. Our journey started when my paediatrician wrote a referral. Someone from a local agency then called me and did an intake over the phone. After the initial referral, it took six months to be assigned a physical therapist then another six months to receive speech therapy. We have been waiting more than a year to have a resource teacher assigned to his preschool classroom.

There are so many unwritten and complicated rules about who gets services. There are rules about how long a child can get services from a specific department, what happens when the child starts school, and so on. There are too many rules and too much red tape to keep track of, and as a parent I shouldn't have to. The system is too fragmented. There are acronyms galore, departments that work with infants, departments that work with rehabilitation, departments that work with speech, that work with preschool, and so on. They overlap, yet no one really knows what the mandate of these different departments is. It makes for a difficult, confusing and inefficient system. This means that my son's needs might not always get met.

*Summary of an online submission from a parent with a two-year old child living in an urban community in south-eastern Ontario (names have been changed or removed for anonymity).*

## What service providers and administrators told us

Service providers and administrators provide the unique perspective of professionals who work directly with children and families and those who plan and manage programs. They told us:

### **1. The current set of programs and services is complex and difficult for parents – and service providers — to navigate.**

Professionals echoed the concerns raised by parents about the complexity of the current set of programs and services. Service providers sometimes have difficulty referring families to appropriate services because they aren't aware of what is available or they aren't familiar with the correct process required to access these services.

### **2. Services should be available to all families regardless of where they live, and must consider the needs of specific populations such as Aboriginal and Francophone communities.**

Service providers and administrators across the province expressed frustration at not being able to help families because a program or service wasn't available in their community, or because programs weren't appropriate for the language or cultural values of the family. They advocate for a child and family services system that provides the same quality and range of programs and services to all families in Ontario – no matter where they live. These services must also be universal and culturally appropriate.

### **3. There are many programs and services that are working well, but could be strengthened, consolidated or re-engineered to move them to the next level.**

Professionals are passionate about the programs and services they deliver but recognize that there are opportunities to strengthen programs so they are more effective and provide a more streamlined service experience for families. Providers are not afraid of change, but do want to make sure we keep the things that are working well.

*“All families, no matter what area they live in, deserve support. They need a safe place to take their children to learn social skills and how to play with other children. They need to have this support accessible in their own community. They need to be able to access the support when they need to and when they want to receive it.”*

*An Early Childhood Educator working in a rural community in South Eastern Ontario*

**4. Communities need common definitions of “integration” and “seamless service” and other core concepts so they know if they are on the right track.**

Many communities have been making progress toward integration. Community leaders are now looking for guidance and support from the ministry to help them better understand the concept of integration and other key terms so everyone can move together toward a shared vision.

**5. A “one-size-fits-all” solution won’t work because communities across the province have widely varied strengths, needs and characteristics (for example, geographic or demographic differences).**

Service professionals are committed to building an integrated services system, but want to retain the flexibility to customize the system so that it can effectively respond to the needs of the community or local families.

**6. Providers are eager to finally get moving toward true integration, but want to make sure we take the time necessary to minimize service disruptions to families and stress on service workers, and make sure we get it right.**

Service professionals and administrators want to help build a more integrated system of services and are eager to realize the vision for Best Start Centres. They advocate for a purposeful approach that moves forward incrementally, taking a series of considered steps toward an integrated services system, and that allows providers the time to adapt to those changes and to be given the support and guidance required to do the systems change work that is necessary.

“We have to come up with a way to make it more about the child and less about the organization. When planning, people are constantly thinking about how “they” can do it best and not how “best” it can be done for children and families. Because we have spent so many years working in silos, everyone thinks the service they provide is the most important service.”

*A program administrator working in rural, urban, Aboriginal and Francophone communities in south-eastern Ontario*

## TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED CHILD AND FAMILY SYSTEM

### Realizing our best future

*With our Best Future in Mind* sets out the vision for an integrated system of services for families and children pre-natal – 12 years of age. The key to success will be our ability to implement a process that moves away from uncoordinated and fragmented approaches, and toward a shared cause with clear and common outcomes in mind and the leadership and accountability necessary to achieve them. The following vision and guiding principles have been developed to inform the development of a framework and implementation process, and reflect the perspectives, advice and experiences gained through consultations and community-government partnerships.

### Working Vision

Best Start Centres will represent a network of services that may or may not be co-located, but function under a common approach to governance, planning and decision-making with clearly identified outcomes. Families will be able to know how well children in their community are doing.

**Seamless service** means that programs and services are so well connected that children and families may actually perceive services as being delivered by one agency, though they may actually be delivered by multiple agencies. “Seamlessness” is about connecting services in such a way that transitions between different services disappear.

More specifically, Best Start Centres:

- will be **easy to recognize access points** into other programs and services within the system (by entering into any one service, a family will enter the whole system)
- will have **shared outcomes** regarding timeliness, quality and availability of services but look quite different from community to community in regard to where services are best located
- will have **common core functions** including information services, referrals, quality childcare and parent literacy supports
- will have **consistent quality and levels of service**, and will provide services to all families no matter where they live
- could be in one building (attached to a school, or near a school or other community service centres), or in most cases, a “centre” would be multiple sites of locally-based agencies **connected** as part of the virtual centre

**Integration** means focusing on client and community needs rather than on the mandate of a particular agency or organization. It means local programs and services are delivered according to a community plan that is based on information about the needs of local children and families. It may include the consolidation of resources, the co-location of different service functions and/or re-engineering of existing resources. An integrated services system means there is “No Wrong Door” – families can enter the system through any service provider and receive the supports they want and need.

**Re-engineering** is the fundamental rethinking and redesign of services and processes to achieve dramatic improvements in outcomes. The key to effective re-engineering is that organizations look at their programs, services and processes from a clean slate, and determine the most effective way to work with other organizations to support the best outcomes for children and families.

- will have **information and referral services** also available through telephone and web modes.

A family’s service experience through Best Start Centres will be further enhanced through the following:

- parents will get **reliable, evidence-based information** and **easy access** to a variety of quality services
- regardless of the access point from which a family enters, they will be provided with **direct support or linked to the supports they need in a timely manner**
- every centre will have a **range of services** based on specific community needs and will provide **information** about other available services
- a **simplified intake/interview** process will mean that families don’t have to deal with the frustration of telling their story multiple times
- parents will be able to obtain a **referral** for the specialized or targeted service they need.

## Some guiding principles

The current fragmentation and complexity of child and family services makes it extremely difficult for many families to obtain the services they need in a timely way. Families seeking assistance often face multiple, complex needs and require the services of more than one program.

The following characteristics have been identified through community engagement as particularly important:

### **1. Family-centred**

A family-centred approach to system- and program-level planning is one in which the family is the primary focus of attention. Actively engaging, respecting, strengthening, and supporting the family – while ensuring optimal outcomes for children – are central to this approach. Key principles include the need to respect parents as experts on their child’s needs, to build authentic relationships with children and families to understand their strengths and needs, to appreciate that all families have competencies that can be strengthened, and to be sensitive to cultural, ethnic and socio-economic diversity.

### **2. No Wrong Door**

A No Wrong Door approach is based on the principle that every door in a child and family system should be the right door. In a No Wrong Door approach, wherever a family first interacts with the child and family system – and regardless of the type of service being provided – family members can be connected quickly and effectively, to a broad range of other services.

Every service provider has a responsibility to provide families with the information that might be of use to them at that time. Service providers also have a responsibility to be welcoming and responsive to parents’ needs – either through direct service or by linking them to appropriate supports. The intent is to build a supportive referral culture across and within the service system so families will not have to negotiate access to multiple services on their own.

### **3. Intentional support**

Intentionality is about acting purposefully, with a specific goal and a plan to accomplish it. Intentional support is about delivering, or brokering, effective services for children and families with the purpose of intentionally improving child outcomes. Service providers should be able to explain *why* they are doing what they are doing each time they interact with, or act on behalf of, a child or family.

For this approach to be effective, providers must understand that their own service is part of a broader system and must be able to offer appropriate and assisted referrals to the service(s) that can best support each family.

### **4. Shared understanding and shared practice**

Having a shared understanding is about building a common vocabulary and gaining enough insight to build solutions together that, in the end, create a better experience for families.

At the local level, this translates into families being able to expect a certain quality and level of services in their community no matter where they live.

Shared understanding also translates into effective cooperation among and between all of the professionals who work with children and youth in communities. Having a shared vocabulary, and mutual trust and respect for each other, allows professionals from across the early years sector to plan, design and implement shared evidence and outcome-based practices that contribute to better outcomes for children and families. At its most basic form, this means local professionals need to know what other professionals do, what role each plays, and how these roles could be altered to improve support to families.

### **5. Appropriate human and financial capacity**

As the process of moving toward genuine integration unfolds, current resources – both human and financial – will be better and more efficiently utilized, and service providers should be better able to prioritize resources as they become available: greater clarity will emerge in regard to how, where and at what level human and financial resources are required for the ultimate aims of the Best Start Centres initiative to be fully realized. It is also critical that staff and leaders be well-trained and supported, effective in their roles, and able to work across traditional divides.

### **6. Culturally responsive**

In an integrated system of child and family services, families should be able to fully participate in and use services regardless of language or cultural differences. A cultural group includes people with common origins, customs and styles of living, who share a sense of identity and language. Their common experiences shape their values, goals, expectations, beliefs, perceptions and behaviors. The ability to be responsive to the needs of families as they make choices and plans, which may be influenced by their cultural background, is important to ensure all families have the same high quality service experience.

We have also heard clearly from Aboriginal service providers that, while existing culturally specific services are promising, non-Aboriginal services will also be required that are more sensitive and effective in serving Aboriginal children and families.

### **7. Improved outcomes for children and families**

As we develop and implement the concept of Best Start Centres and advance toward a system of child and family services that is truly integrated, we expect to achieve a number of important outcomes. One component of the Best Start Centres initiative will be the identification of outcomes at different levels of the service system and the development of strategies for more effective data collection. Shared outcomes will help establish a uniform accountability across service providers within the system and will contribute to a continuous quality improvement process.



## MOVING FORWARD

### A province-wide partnership

As we progress from the preliminary phase of this complex work, we are confident that much progress has been made toward a truly integrated system of children's services. The working vision and guiding principles presented in this update, and the initial work toward building a common language and understanding of integration itself, are offered as important starting points for shared reflection, discussion and planning at every level of the system.

We will continue working toward a fuller, more concise and more widely understood articulation of the Best Start Centres concept as we develop the critically important provincial framework. In this regard, there is important work yet to be done – for example, in the areas of shared outcomes, common quality and accountability mechanisms, and governance – and we are committed to working with communities and stakeholders to continue this work. As we move forward, we will create additional opportunities for feedback that allow us to stay connected to parents, service providers and community organizations.

Building a common language will be an important next step as communities in Ontario move toward an integrated child and family services system. There are a series of additional working papers, including a paper on understanding various aspects of integration, being developed. They will be available on a sector specific site geared to service providers, program administrators and planners. As the site develops, it will offer materials that explore concepts central to the Best Start Centres initiative – such as those described in the guiding principles – and feature successful strategies, activities and processes that have helped communities progress toward integration.

### Next steps

As we move this initiative forward, we will focus initially on the following three key building blocks:

#### **Implementing community action research**

The Community Action Research project is a two-pronged approach to studying and learning from communities as we continue to develop the Best Start Centres concept.

A series of reports and best practice documents will be made available so that groups across the province can learn from, and implement, successful strategies developed and tested in other communities.

The **Community Integration Leader** project will monitor and learn from a small group of communities that have already taken significant steps toward creating a seamless, integrated system of services as they progress in their broad community-wide integration efforts. This project will:

- document the strategies and processes of selected communities to understand how they have progressed and how they continue to evolve
- provide concrete examples of enhanced integration that can be used to promote and encourage the Best Start vision
- monitor the impact of integration on outcomes for young children and families
- inform key steps, strategies and skills required for other communities to progress towards integration
- inform the critically important provincial framework document.

The **Innovation Fund** will provide one-time, small-scale funding to support community groups in undertaking specific, focused work in core areas related to integration, with the goal of developing innovative strategies that can be applied in communities across Ontario. The Innovation Fund will support projects related to integrated services in eight core areas including:

- shared intake
- a simplified and streamlined referral – assessment – treatment process
- seamless service
- information management across providers
- measuring common outcomes across providers
- effective in-service training and mentoring
- reducing wait times through re-engineering
- pooled funding.

## **Re-engineering speech and language services**

We have chosen to re-engineer a selected service at the provincial level in a way that will immediately assist all communities but, at the same time, provide the government with a shared cross-ministry integration experience. Speech and language services were chosen because of the fundamental impact that speech and language functions play in a child's development.

Speech and language delays/disorders in children are common and can lead to decreased academic achievement and life outcomes. Evidence shows that there are windows of opportunity for language and literacy learning during which children/students can develop optimal abilities in these two areas and, after which, successful remediation of delays becomes more challenging. These windows are:

- birth to 30 months for early language development
- Kindergarten to Grade 3 for literacy development.

Speech and/or language services are provided through three ministries – the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. This fragmented service structure can lead to service gaps for children, confusion for families, duplicate assessments, and delays in receiving services.

Re-engineering fragmented provincial speech and language services is pivotal to improving early learning and literacy outcomes for Ontario's children. The three ministries are partnering to explore, implement and evaluate various speech and language service delivery models and approaches for children/students from birth to the end of Grade 3, to inform a future provincial vision. This work has been informed by the External Reference Group and other experts and providers who will continue to advise on this important element of the overall process of developing Best Start Centres in Ontario.

## **Developing an outcomes index**

An Outcomes Index will build on existing data collection instruments like the Early Development Instrument (EDI; Offord and Janus, McMaster University) and Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to more broadly measure and monitor child, family, community and social outcomes as well as broader system functioning outcomes. The index will allow transparent reporting of these outcomes at the community, regional

and provincial level to mark progress and point to continuous improvement efforts both locally and provincially.

Developing the Outcomes Index represents a major undertaking that will provide a critical element of the provincial framework. The process will engage experts in the areas of child, family, community and social and economic/fiscal outcomes, and experts in the areas of program evaluation and system performance measures.

## **Conclusion**

The future we build for our children is the future we build for ourselves as a society. Realizing the vision of Ontario Best Start Child and Family Centres is vitally important to our social and economic wellbeing, particularly in a diverse Ontario, and an increasingly global and knowledge-driven economy.

The government is committed to providing strong leadership, and working across ministries to eliminate fragmented policy making and program development. We likewise recognize – and deeply respect – the many hundreds of organizations and individuals who make a difference for Ontario’s children every day, and whose partnership and commitment will be the vital underpinning of our success.

We will continue to consult with parents, communities and service providers as the Best Start Centres concept continues to evolve. We are also mindful that much important work remains if we are to further engage Aboriginal, Francophone and other communities and ensure that every child in Ontario, without exception, is given the best possible start in life.

We acknowledge with thanks the involvement of many organizations and individuals whose perspectives and experiences are reflected in this document, and will continue to inform our future work. While there are many obstacles to overcome, it is clear that we are excited to move forward with this truly transformational work. Through partnership, commitment, and a shared sense of purpose, we will achieve our shared vision of a truly integrated system of services that best serves children and families and inspires the best future for all Ontarians.