

Engaging Alberta municipal level governments in support of early learning and care ^[1]

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Introduction

Over the last decade, Alberta, in common with other Canadian provinces and territories, has introduced initiatives to increase both the quality and quantity of early learning and care services for children below the mandatory school age and their families. These initiatives, and the public investments to support them, have come at the same time as the demand for services has increased and the expectations for what early learning and care might achieve have risen. And yet in Alberta, as in the rest of Canada, early learning and care services continue, in the main, to be organized, funded and delivered in ways that limit their contribution to individual and community well-being. Despite the growing body of research on the benefits that flow from a more systematic approach to the delivery of services, with higher levels of public management and financing, Alberta, in common with other provinces and territories, relies on a mixed market of public, private-for-profit and not-for-profit providers for the organization, funding and delivery of services (Muttart Foundation et al, 2013; Penn, 2013; White and Friendly, 2012; OECD, 2006). The result is a complicated mix of services, many of a modest quality, that are unevenly distributed and not well-connected or organized at the local, regional and provincial levels. The main purpose of the current paper is to raise questions and generate discussion on the possible roles Alberta municipal level governments might play, and the responsibilities they might take on, to advance early learning and care (ELC) in the province with a focus on the greater public management, planning and delivery of child care services.

To date, municipal level governments have largely been absent from discussions of how to advance early learning and care both in Alberta and beyond. This omission, while it reflects the limited roles they currently play, remains at odds with the arguments advanced by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and others for decentralizing the management and planning of early learning and care to a local level (OECD, 2004; Jenson and Mahon, 2002). It further overlooks the historic roles Alberta municipalities, at least, played in the development and delivery of child care services (Muttart Foundation, 2011; Langford, 2011). The growing urbanization of Alberta, and Canada, means that small, medium and large urban centres are increasingly the places in which families seek out and access early learning and care services. The importance of place in social policy, and the understanding that it is at the local level that service delivery and integration takes place, demands an appropriate balance of decision-making and authority that reconciles centralized interests in consistency and equity with decentralized concerns around local needs and conditions. As Mahon and Jensen (2006) observe 'cities matter', and it is, therefore, important to at least consider how municipal governments might participate more fully in the management, planning and delivery of early learning and care in partnership with the provincial and federal governments.

The paper includes three main sections. The first provides a brief overview of the organization, funding and delivery of early learning and care in Canada and Alberta. The second describes the limited roles municipal governments play in supporting early learning and care across Canada, as well as those they previously played in Alberta. The final section outlines the rationale for municipal government involvement in early learning and care, summarizes the context for a greater level of municipal engagement in Alberta and presents some options for the roles and responsibilities municipal governments might play to advance the field. The options presented are not prescriptive; nor are they intended to serve as recommendations.

Rather, they are ideas for consideration that draw on what remains a relatively under-developed area of policy research, with a limited number of current and previous Canadian examples to examine or explore. The historic relationships between Canadian municipalities and the provincial and federal levels of government have not supported strong roles for municipal governments in either the development of social policy or the design and delivery of social infrastructure (Bradford, 2002) - including early learning and care (Mahon, 2014). And, while there are signs that these relationships may be subject to some rethinking, if not significant change, there is much that remains unconsidered and unresolved (Graham and Andrew, 2014). As Jenson and Mahon (2002) observe, however, the barriers to change may be political rather than constitutional, speaking to the influences of history and culture in shaping how potentially larger roles and responsibilities for municipal governments are considered and evaluated.

Region: Alberta ^[3]

Tags: access ^[4]

government initiative ^[5]

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[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/access>

[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/government-initiative>

[6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/municipal>