

The municipal role in child care ^[1]

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Executive Summary

In 2021, the federal government introduced a Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) program, to be implemented through federal-provincial/territorial bilateral agreements. The program followed on the federal government's budget commitment to provide parents with, on average, \$10-a-day regulated child care spaces within the next five years.

With the notable exception of Ontario, along with, to a limited degree for some years, Alberta, child care in Canada has not historically been delivered by municipalities. The CWELCC provides an opportunity for a significantly enhanced role for municipalities to increase access to quality child care.

In this series of papers, the authors examine the ability of municipalities to fund, manage, and deliver child care in response to the increased demand. Martha Friendly reviews international precedents for federally funded and municipally managed and/or delivered child care with a view to learning from their experiences and considers the advantages that a heightened municipal role could play in strengthening Canada's newest social program. Gordon Cleveland and Sue Colley investigate the roles and responsibilities of the different orders of government and how they will change in light of the CWELCC, with a focus on actions that Ontario will need to take over the next 20 years. Rachel Vickerson and Carolyn Ferns discuss how governments can play a role in addressing the dire need for early child care educators, while Carley Holt proposes a roadmap for municipalities that brings stakeholders together to establish distinct approaches for their communities.

Municipal

Friendly explores how municipalities can become more significant players in boosting access to early learning and child care, considering both public management and public provision as opportunities.

Cleveland and Colley look at the history of the delivery of child care in Ontario, the changes that the CWELCC will bring to the municipal role, and the importance of municipal involvement in provincial planning.

Vickerson and Ferns discuss the importance of staffing; they argue that municipally operated child care provides, on average, better working conditions and wages than private or non-profit care.

Holt provides examples of cities across Canada that have defined a role in supporting accessible, equitable, and high-quality early learning and child care initiatives, and presents a list of seven key actions that municipalities can take to achieve these goals.

Provincial

Friendly notes that the implementation of the CWELCC's goal of reducing parent fees substantially was met, or nearly met, by all provinces and territories by the end of 2022 - but that this success has driven demand for more child care programs, turning a spotlight on the need for equitable expansion in each province.

Cleveland and Colley provide a list of actions Ontario will need to take over the next 20 years to fully develop the early learning and child care system, including more operational funding, better compensation for educators, loan guarantees for capital expansion for both non-profit and public organizations, and increased subsidies for children with special needs.

Vickerson and Ferns recommend that provinces improve their expansion planning, including removing legislative barriers, and develop province-wide workforce strategies and pay scales for early childhood educators.

Federal

Friendly notes that, until 2021, there was no defined federal role in, or funding for, building a Canada-wide child care system. She reviews international precedents from the European Union, where senior governments provide funding and goals, while municipalities largely manage and deliver child care, based on the principle that services should be delivered by the level of government closest to those who are affected (i.e., subsidiarity).

Cleveland and Colley foresee the necessity for further funding from the federal government to meet the expected demand for child care spaces in Ontario over the next 20 years.

Intergovernmental cooperation

Friendly points to examples of new kinds of partnerships between municipalities and provinces, such as a municipal organization in Manitoba that worked with the provincial government, using provincial and federal funds, to create and construct modular child care centres in rural and First Nations communities.

Cleveland and Colley criticize Ontario's lack of collaboration with local municipalities in child care planning since signing the CWELCC agreement, and call for the formation of a new provincial body to ensure that Ontario's Child Care Action Plans reflect municipal knowledge and priorities.

Vickerson and Ferns argue that the federal government should include municipalities in child care policy-making. Involving municipalities in the CWELCC agreements' intergovernmental meetings and its Implementation Committees would enable them to align child care with other priorities and bring local expertise in operation and system management to the table.

Holt notes the importance of creating a board or committee that focuses on early learning and child care and involves key stakeholders and all order of governments in order to form partnerships and create collaborative, sustainable solutions.

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