

# Face of child services to change [CA-ON] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

A group of people representing various fields dealing with children met upstairs at La Place Rendez-Vous to discuss the future of children's services in Rainy River District.

The planning session was the first of many as the district prepares to implement the provincial government's "Best Start" initiative, which was first announced back in July.

The aim of the program is to support children and their families in the early years of development - from birth through to Grade 1.

"The vision is to have children enter into the school system ready to learn, ready to achieve success," explained Kim Gardiman, children's services manager at the Rainy River District Social Services Administration Board.

The Ministry of Children and Youth Services is calling for "neighbourhood early learning and care hubs" to provide child care and parenting programs, as well as screening, assessment, and treatment for speech and language disorders.

The additional funding provided for the program also is expected to create 25,000 new child care spaces in the province by the end of 2007-08.

"It's very exciting for us in the field," said Gardiman. "We have a lot of work to do. We're thrilled and encouraged because everyone seems so supportive."

The DSSAB has hired Jeanette Cawston as the "Best Start" co-ordinator. She was helping to run Friday's meeting and identified parents as an important part of the equation in student success.

The ministry has developed a plan for a hub in nearly every public school in the province. But while that may work in southern Ontario, where there's a high population density, that model poses a problem in a district where people sometimes are dispersed across wide distances.

"In the north, it has to be unique," Gardiman said of the local resolution to the problem. "There might be a hub in every community, but not every school.

The goal will be to ensure all families receive support no matter where they live, she remarked.

District school boards and service providers already have signed on to be partners in this initiative.

These include the Rainy River District School Board, the Northwest Catholic District School Board, the Mine Centre District School Area Board, the Atikokan Roman Catholic Separate School Board, le Conseil scolaire du district du Grand Nord de l'Ontario, and the Northwestern Health Unit, along with the DSSAB.

Last Friday's planning session was open to individuals from advisory groups, including Family and Children's Services, child care programs, local school boards, and parents.

The first step will be to increase the number of licensed child care spaces and subsidies in the coming year, with priority for children in junior and senior kindergarten and then gradual expansion for children aged zero to four.

The DSSAB will receive a total of \$4.4 million over the next three years to implement the program across the district and create an estimated 95 new licensed child care spaces.

Province-wide, the ministry is delivering \$1.1 billion in federal funds to implement "Best Start."

"This is the largest investment in child care and early child development in Ontario's history," Children and Youth Services minister Mary Anne Chambers said.

The province also is waiving municipal cost-sharing on the new child care funding beginning in 2005-06 through 2009-10.

"This move will save municipalities more than \$208 million over the next three years," the ministry said.

- reprinted from the Fort Frances Times

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