

CHILD CARE IN CANADA BY 2020: A VISION AND A WAY FORWARD



*A discussion paper for Canada's 4th national
child care policy conference, ChildCare2020*

FAMILIES IN CANADA desperately need access to early childhood education and child care services that only a comprehensive system can provide. The key to building this system is the same today as it has been for many years: The federal government must step up to the plate. Provincial/territorial programs on their own will continue to evolve in painful, slow steps leaving many parents unable to find or afford quality programs for their children. As this discussion document shows, it doesn't—and shouldn't—have to be this way. Read on to see what federal leadership and dedicated, accountable investment in a child care system could accomplish by 2020.

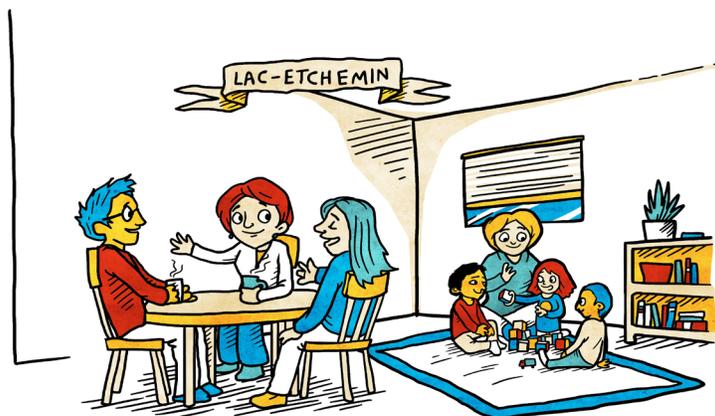
1 A VISION

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE IN CANADA IN 2020

It's a May morning in 2020. High quality early childhood education and child care (ECEC) has become a reality for most children and families across Canada's six time zones. In Joe Batt's Arm on Fogo Island, Newfoundland, a nutritious lunch is being served to the toddlers at the new early childhood centre in the school. In small-town Lac-Etchemin, Quebec, and suburban Markham, Ontario, home child care providers arrive at early childhood hubs to meet with their networks while the children enjoy outdoor activities. In Winnipeg, a stay-at-home mom with a new baby arrives at nursery school with her three-year-old daughter while at Haida Gwaii's Skidegate Children's Centre, an educator greets the First Nations parents and children as they arrive.

ECEC programs in each of these communities have unique features but share many common characteristics. Although there are still waiting lists, parents across Canada know that a space will be available before too long. Substantial service expansion means that all parents—whether or not in the paid workforce—can now find a space. Sustained public operational/base funding to services means fees are much lower than before and affordable.

Under the new Canada-wide policy framework, provinces, territories and Indigenous communities receive federal funds. Each has a well-worked-out long-term plan with expansion targets. To meet them, provincial/ territorial officials work closely with local governments, school authorities, other service providers, early childhood educators and parent/ community groups, as well as with the federal government.



MORE PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

With provincially set parent fees and salary scales, and collaboration between provincial governments, municipalities and school boards, today's ECEC is now more publicly managed. Planning, developing and supporting high quality programs for the families who choose to use them is a local responsibility within overall provincial/territorial plans. Parent committees have input on key issues but the days when parents and volunteers were responsible for raising funds to cover basic operating costs are long gone.

Although there are still quite a few non-profit programs, many more ECEC services across the 0 - 5 age range are now delivered by school boards and municipalities. These work in partnership with early childhood educator and teacher organizations to ensure that curriculum and service delivery are based on inclusive, appropriate best practices.

The for-profit sector has stayed small, diminishing as the public non-profit sectors expand. Some for-profits closed when their owners retired while a handful were supported to become part of the publicly managed not-for-profit system. Only public, non-profit and existing for-profit programs are eligible for the new base funding.

As the supply and affordability of regulated ECEC has grown, parents' reliance on unregulated care with no public oversight has diminished substantially. Many previously unregulated home child care providers have now become part of the funded, regulated system.

The mix of full-day ECEC centres (including kindergarten), part-day preschools, home/family child care, school-age and family resource programs is determined at the local level based on a planning process taking into account community needs and priorities. Services that seamlessly provide "care" and "learning" for children are offered across Canada, with parenting support resources integrated into service provision. The specific arrangements vary by province/territory, but all are designed to meet parents' schedules while providing terrific care and learning environments for young children.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ECEC?

We use "early childhood education and child care" (ECEC) unless referring specifically to child care. ECEC is an aspirational term that means all full- and part-time care and learning services for children from birth to compulsory school age, including centres, preschools and nursery schools, regulated family child care, kindergarten and family resource programs. The paper also references the need for outside-school-hours services up to age 12. The vision is that these programs—which play multiple roles for children, families and society—can be blended, so that care and education for young children are inseparable. International examples show that no matter what the name, well-designed ECEC can successfully blend care, learning, and support for children and families at one and the same time.

ENHANCED QUALITY

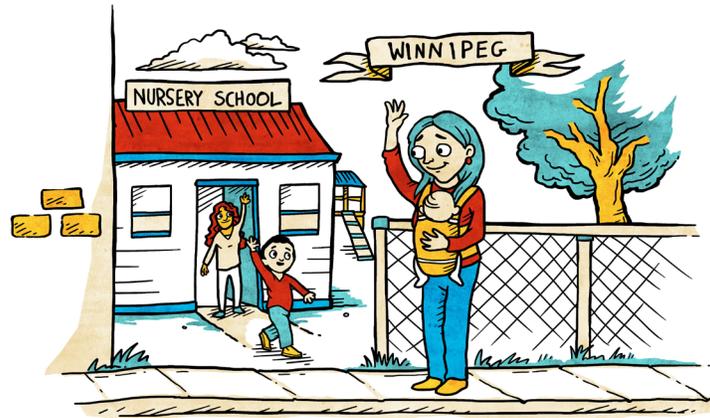
Quality has improved across Canada. Broad curriculum frameworks designed to be adapted at the program level to support local choices are regularly fine-tuned. Children with disabilities and from diverse cultural backgrounds are fully included in all programs with extra support when needed. The ratio of educators to children is favourable to ensure that children's needs are well met at all ages.

All ECEC settings are staffed by early childhood educators, share common pedagogical approaches and provide enriching, caring, seamless and comfortable environments for children and parents. Outside-school-hours programs are mostly school-based and provide a range of enriching age-appropriate activities for older children up to age 12. Early childhood training for home child care providers has become the norm as has provision of equipment, resources, support and networking. And as public funding for regulated services has grown, wages and benefits for home care providers better reflect the value of their work.

All early childhood educators are now educated at the post-secondary level before they enter the profession; lead educators have four-year early childhood education degrees or more. Regular in-service learning opportunities are available for anyone working with young children. ECE is a well-recognized, mostly unionized profession with career ladders and good wages. All across Canada, ECEC program quality and staff morale are strong. The days of nonstop staff turnover are a thing of the past.

Many ECEC centres are now in purpose-built (or purpose-renovated) facilities, some in, or on the grounds of, elementary schools. Centres are designed with young children in mind—inviting rooms, big windows, easily accessible outdoor spaces, on-site kitchens so children can participate in meal preparation, good storage and equipment and dedicated staff rooms. Some architects now specialize in creative design of ECEC buildings and outdoor environments.

Federal, provincial and territorial governments have improved their legislated parental leave provisions to fit the varying needs and financial realities of families. Leaves, available to all new parents, are more flexible, and better paid. There is also an additional paid leave for new fathers only that must be taken shortly after the birth. Many improvements have been made to services and policies for parents who work non-standard hours, and a national task force set up to find more comprehensive solutions is well underway.



A COMMON VISION, DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Despite important commonalities, 2020's ECEC is not "one size fits all". Provinces, territories and Indigenous communities have designed their own ECEC programs within the framework of broad overarching Canada-wide principles and policies, legislation, funding and public reporting arrangements.

So while the broad strokes are similar, the specifics—schedules, mix of services, approaches to integration of care and education, and cultural emphases—are distinctive. At Skidegate Children's Centre, the community's Haida culture is central, while the Markham centre and its home-based providers' network reflect the community's varied cultural diversity. There is considerable focus on ongoing quality improvement while innovation and creative approaches are supported, encouraged and shared. Thus, through a Canada-wide outdoor activity initiative, centres in Lac-Etchemin, Winnipeg and Joe Batt's Arm are all experimenting with "forest kindergartens" and other outdoor programming, and sharing their results.

While Canada's national ECEC program is, and always will be, a work in progress, in 2020 it is enormously popular. Parents across the income spectrum see that their children are happy and benefitting. Communities and politicians like the societal benefits and the positive economic activity brought about through increased mothers' employment and spending in local communities. Everyone takes pride in this long overdue social program that is good for all children and families. When the President of the United States toured Quebec, she visited one of Lac-Etchemin's community hub centres and took the community's ideas back to Washington DC to inform the new approach to ECEC she has been promoting.

All in all, the national ECEC program is deemed a great success all around. It looks like it's here to stay.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. How does this vision fit with yours?
2. What difference could this vision make for children, parents, women, educators, your community, Canada?



2014: WHAT WE HAVE NOW

In Canada today, there is no national ECEC program or policy. Each province/territory has its own child care policy and provides spaces in centres and regulated family child care; most also regulate nursery schools/preschools. These are supported by a variety of funding arrangements. Each jurisdiction also provides publicly-funded kindergarten, mostly for five-year-olds.

Over the years, provinces/territories, local governments and early childhood organizations have developed many ECEC initiatives aimed at expanding access, improving quality, restructuring public funding, and strengthening training and policy. Many of these initiatives have been significant. The most noteworthy is Quebec's program that funds services rather than subsidizing individual families. Also of note is Ontario's expansion of its kindergarten for all four- and five-year-olds to a full school-day. Other initiatives include: Manitoba's and PEI's unique approaches to base program funding; Toronto's quality improvement scheme; Vancouver's child care planning process and the strong support for a community plan proposed by advocates to transform ECEC in British Columbia. As well, ECEC groups, unions, and some governments have made inroads to improve the notoriously low wages and benefits of program staff, although much more needs to be done. Most recently, integrating child care and education has been a priority in much of Canada; eight¹ provinces/territories have moved to full school day kindergarten while ministries of education are now responsible for child care in eight provinces/territories.

Despite these efforts, child care and kindergarten are still separate programs. High quality child care remains limited in supply and financially out of reach for the majority of families.

Canada has never had a national ECEC program or policy. We made a very modest start in 2005, when a Liberal government tabled the national Foundations program. At that time, all provinces/territories developed action plans and agreed to proceed, supported by new federal funding. However, the following year, the newly elected Conservative government cancelled the bi-lateral federal/provincial/territorial agreements that were the basis of the evolving program.

¹Of these, two territories provide some full-day kindergarten.



Globally, Canada is one of the world's wealthiest countries but international reviews from groups such as UNICEF (2008) rank us at the bottom when it comes to ECEC. Cataloguing the problems across Canada has become clichéd: severe shortages of places, especially for infants, children with disabilities, Indigenous and rural/remote communities, and families working non-standard hours. Underfunding and consequent high user fees that put regulated child care out of reach for many families and threaten the financial viability of programs. Difficulty attracting and retaining qualified educators because the occupation is not highly valued and pays poorly. Weak program quality that cannot be

considered educational or developmental. Service gaps that encourage expansion of for-profit, sometimes corporate big-box, child care. Widespread reliance on unregulated child care—the only affordable and available option for most parents. Kindergartens that fail to recognize the importance of the early years or parents' work schedules, as they operate only part-work-day and mostly for five-year-olds.

MARKET-BASED APPROACHES DON'T WORK

Canada's reliance on a child care market—in which governments take limited responsibility—is the key explanation for this persistent patchwork. Rather than building a coherent public system with long-term goals, planning, substantial public funding and public management, market forces and a consumerist approach shape, create, maintain, deliver and finance Canadian child care services. Federal and provincial/territorial child care policy encourages this dependence on markets, flying in the face of clear evidence that public management of child care, including public/non-profit delivery, is a much more effective and fair way to deliver services.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What works and what doesn't work right now?
2. Which groups are left out of ECEC?

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ECEC IN CANADA: WHY IT'S A PRIORITY

WHY WE NEED IT

It is well recognized that ECEC has the potential to address multiple social and political objectives. Women's equality and employment, poverty reduction, family-work balance, social integration and equal opportunity, improved child development and well-being, and economic prosperity are regularly cited as good reasons to support high quality ECEC.

Demographic trends go a long way toward explaining why ECEC is on so many agendas. The Canadian demographic context is a main driver for universal ECEC: high rates of working mothers, generational and class inequality, persistent child poverty, an aging workforce, unacceptable conditions for Indigenous people, and substantial ethnic and racial diversity.

A second compelling driver is expert opinion and public recognition that high quality early childhood education is a foundation for lifelong learning with long-term implications for societal prosperity. Although these arguments usually focus on the importance of the early years, high quality outside-school-hours programs are also significant. They contribute to the growing maturity and independence of school-aged children as well as providing opportunities for skill development and learning.

Many Canadians make the connections between inequality and public policy, public services and social justice, economics and the social

MULTIPLE GOALS

When the Royal Commission on the Status of Women proposed a national day care program in 1970, its main goal was women's equality. Since then, as additional goals have become part of the debate, knowledge has expanded and the language has shifted. For this reason, what was called day care in the 1970s and child care in the 1980s/1990s is now often called early learning and care, or early childhood education and care.



with employment, debt, housing and family time. The contemporary term, “Generation Squeeze”, describes the squeeze between young adults’ weak employment prospects and the high costs of living and raising a family. Further, our children’s access to early childhood education is demonstrably more limited than in other countries where it is the norm to provide ECEC for at least two or three years before compulsory schooling.

ECEC as a human right for both women and children is well accepted internationally, articulated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Education for All (EFA). In a number of countries, this idea is carried into national policy that makes ECEC an entitlement for all children.

Overall, in the absence of federal participation and leadership, Canada’s record on ECEC issues leaves many family and societal needs unmet.

A STRONG FEDERAL ROLE

What does a “national ECEC program” mean in the Canadian context? Canada is a federation—a form of government in which authority and responsibility are divided between federal and provincial governments. The Canadian federation was set up by the Constitution Act of 1867 which set out federal and provincial responsibilities. Health, education and social services are usually provincial/territorial (except programs for Indigenous on-reserve communities and military families) although social benefits taking the form of payments to individual Canadians (such as pensions and Employment Insurance) are often federal programs.

Historically, Canadian federalism has been dynamic, shifting with the times. Pan-Canadian social programs have generally been a unifying factor among the Canadian population. Medicare, the most valued of these, was shaped by the federal Canada Health Act’s five principles but is delivered by the provinces/territories. Provincial responsibility for health didn’t prevent the federal government from playing a strong role in building the national health system. Overall, what the Government of Canada can or can’t do is determined more by a combination of ideology, expediency and—ultimately—political will than by hard-and-fast rules.

An overarching common vision and principles for ECEC for all children and families across Canada

sphere, democracy, taxation and fairness. As this dialogue about basic values and what Canada stands for has gained momentum, the idea that a national ECEC program should be part of a vision for a more equal, fair Canada has become part of the discourse.

Few would disagree that Canada’s support for families, women, and children is inadequate and has negative implications now and in the future. Young adults struggle

are appropriate, possible and necessary. A well-designed national child care program could be structured to fit the brand of federalism that created other national social programs valued by Canadians such as Medicare, and remind us why we have a federal government. Within the national framework, provinces and territories would determine the mix of services, training arrangements, curriculum frameworks and other elements.

WHY IT'S AFFORDABLE FOR CANADA

One of the justifications for doing little on child care at the national level has been the mantra that as a society we “can’t afford” the kinds of family policies provided in many other countries. Individualized “choice” mechanisms such as the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) and income-splitting have most recently been offered in their place, eating up billions of public dollars that could instead be used to build a national child care program.

The idea that ever-lower personal and corporate taxes are desirable has become part of the common political discourse, with concepts such as fair taxation and the collective good being placed firmly on the back burner. Paradoxically, polls show considerable public concern about Canada’s growing inequality, public support for paying (slightly) higher taxes to sustain social programs and continued majority support for a bigger role for government.

There is also a strong case to be made for recognizing the substantial long- and short-term economic benefits of universal high quality ECEC. A 2012 Toronto Dominion Bank study reviewed economic benefits from children’s learning and development, reduced social costs and increased workforce participation. A key Quebec study showed enhanced government revenues from increased mothers’ labour force participation—enough to offset 40% of Quebec’s hefty child care spending.

These larger societal and financial issues are closely related to provision of a new social program like ECEC.

THINK ABOUT IT

- 1. Should the federal government play a role in ECEC policy? Why?**
- 2. Do you think Canada afford a national ECEC program?**

REALIZING OUR VISION: PRINCIPLES AND SYSTEM COMPONENTS



Years of experience and the best evidence show that the surest way to ensure tangible ECEC options (“choice”) for all Canadian families would be to use a multi-layered governance approach that includes: an overarching national policy framework and funding strategy; robust service systems designed and administered by each province/territory; and local management and planning, including a democratic voice for parents and early childhood educators.

The national policy framework should be based on a set of overarching principles and include a number of system components covering roles and responsibilities, targets and timetables, and accountability measures to assess progress towards goals. We propose the following principles and components.

PRINCIPLES

Principle 1: Universal Entitlement

ECEC is a public good, a human right and part of building the equal, just Canada we value. Young children are citizens in their own right, entitled to a fair share of society’s resources, including appropriate high quality ECEC programs provided as a public good, not a commodity

A key community and government role is to support families in their parenting role. Since well-designed high quality ECEC programs benefit all children and families as well as enabling specific groups (women, low income families, children with disabilities, newcomers to Canada), they should be accessible for all children regardless of their ability, economic, cultural or linguistic circumstances, where they live in Canada or whether their parents are in or out of the workforce, studying or working non-standard hours. ECEC should be available in the local community or neighbourhood and participation should be voluntary—determined by parents.

ECEC should be available at affordable fees or no fee (like kindergarten). While there may be special measures to eliminate financial barriers for vulnerable children and families, universal entitlement means ECEC services should not be targeted only to the vulnerable—middle class and affluent children are also entitled to participate.

Principle 2: High Quality

The importance of quality for child development, wellbeing and happiness cannot be overstated. It must be central to all ECEC provision as it can have significant economic and social benefits through its effects on child development. Conversely, poor quality ECEC fails to meet the human rights test of “in the best interests of the child” and, indeed, may even be harmful.

Policy frameworks and services should follow the best available evidence about what contributes to high quality for children. Frameworks and programs should also incorporate human rights considerations such as full inclusion of children with disabilities and respect for diversity.

High quality ECEC is best assured through a system of linked elements. These elements—ideas, governance, infrastructure, planning and policy development, financing, human resources (such as good wages and working conditions for staff), physical environment, data/research—should be taken into account as part of an all-encompassing policy framework.

Integrating child care and early childhood education as “strong and equal partners” is desirable from a quality perspective. While there are multiple ways to do this, integration across multiple domains including financing, training, pedagogy, and governance makes the system stronger.

Principle 3: Comprehensiveness

Comprehensiveness addresses the range and variety of ECEC services and the related policies and practices required to support young families. Since families come in all types, shapes and sizes, they should be able to choose from a reasonable variety of flexible, high quality ECEC service options including full- and part-time centres, regulated home-based care, emergency/respice/occasional ECEC and parenting support programs. These should be available at reasonably convenient locations.

Policies and practices to ensure time and resources to help families balance work and family are also required and should include: adequately paid leaves for family responsibilities (flexible maternity, parental and paternity leave); pregnancy, health and parenting supports; flexible working arrangements; living wages; affordable housing; and income security to mitigate poverty.

SYSTEM COMPONENTS

Component 1: A National Policy Framework

The national policy framework should begin with the idea that ECEC is a public good rather than a private commodity and—while recognizing that jurisdictions have historically had a variety of approaches—commit to moving it to a public/



not-for-profit, publicly-managed, publicly-funded, publicly-accountable system.

Development of the policy framework will require commitment to federal leadership—Canada’s “glue”—but must also be developed in collaboration with provinces, territories and Indigenous communities.

The policy framework should be guided by the principles of universal entitlement, high quality and comprehensiveness. It should set Canada-wide goals for implementation, targets and timetables and strategies for ensuring accountability and assessment of progress.

It should recognize early childhood educators as valued professionals with appropriate training, remuneration and career opportunities.

The framework should include definitions of provincial/territorial roles and responsibilities and the elements of provincial/territorial policy frameworks such as: plans for expansion, transition to public management and base funding for services, ongoing quality improvement, human resource strategies, data collection/research/evaluation, and accountability measures.

The policy framework should reference the roles of local governments such as municipalities and school boards, as well as the ECEC community. There should be a commitment to democratic participation that includes educators and parents at all levels.

Component 2: A Long-Term Sustained Funding Plan

The short- and long-term benefits of ECEC to children, families and society make it a valuable economic and social investment. Like public education and health care, high quality, accessible ECEC requires substantial public funding.

The national funding plan should include: capital funding to expand the system; operational funding to sustain services and improve remuneration of the ECEC workforce while keeping parent fees affordable; and funds for data, research, evaluation, innovation and accountability measures.

A transition to stable base funding must be a key part of system development. Commitment to this transition by provinces/territories must be spelled out in the national long-term funding plan.

To support this, there must be sustained, predictable federal funding to provinces/territories and Indigenous communities for system expansion and maintenance.

Funds should increase each year to ensure planned expansion until the program reaches maturity. A long-term public funding goal of at least 1% of GDP for children aged 0-5 is the common minimum international benchmark. A commitment to indexing ongoing public funds to inflation would promote system stability.

Component 3: Shared Work on System Development

Since ECEC is a human right and a public good for all Canadians, federal/provincial/territorial and local governments should collectively accept responsibility for ensuring its development and delivery. Their respective responsibilities should be clearly stated in the proposed policy framework.

Developing a high quality ECEC system is a complex task that will require the contributions of multiple stakeholders from across Canada—policy makers from all levels of government, researchers,

service providers and educators. Specific elements of the ECEC system can best be carried out through ongoing collaborative work. These include:

- An ongoing national plan for data collection/analysis
- A national research agenda
- A plan for ongoing evaluation of progress towards meeting the system's principles
- A strategy for transparent public reporting and accountability
- Sharing and consideration of exemplary initiatives and practices
- Public education about the benefits of high quality ECEC and its components, such as staffing
- Finding opportunities for innovation in areas such as program development, pedagogy, ongoing quality improvement and early childhood training

THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC FUNDING AND PUBLIC POLICY

These guiding principles and system components have been put forward to stimulate discussion about how to begin the process of moving Canada to a more coherent ECEC system that resembles the one in the vision statement. Two things are unequivocally critical for shaping the system we envision: substantial, well-directed public funding and robust public policy.

Limited public funding virtually guarantees that high quality services will be generally unavailable and unaffordable for many families while preventing the good wages needed to attract and retain highly qualified staff. At the same time, delivery of funds through ineffectual mechanisms and insufficient public management make it difficult to effectively “steer” towards better integration of care and education and towards delivering the right mix of high quality affordable services that families want and need.

Thus, adequate public funding and robust, well-designed public policy matter very much for ECEC quality, access and creating the desired “strong and equal partnership”. If good policy is absent, public funds may be spent without achieving the best possible results. On the other hand, if public funding is too limited, even a strong policy framework cannot deliver.

The two—public policy and public funding—must go hand in hand.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. Is it important for ECEC policy to include common principles and elements across Canada? Why?

MOVING FORWARD

Canada’s parents, researchers, activists and many policy makers have spent decades advocating for a universal, inclusive, high quality, public, comprehensive ECEC system. Despite these efforts, our goal has not yet been achieved. This paper has outlined a vision for such a system and—crucially—how it is possible to “get from here to there.”



Winnipeg will be the venue for discussing and updating the broader ECEC community’s approach to the key early ECEC issues and challenges of the day. We will come together in November 2014 to expand and deepen our understanding, put ECEC back on the agenda and strengthen the social movement. The aim is to ensure that—this time—the outcome will be the national ECEC system that Canadians from coast-to-coast-to coast want, and that we, our children and our children’s children deserve.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What needs to happen to make this vision a reality?
2. What role can you play?



This discussion paper was prepared for the ChildCare2020 Conference (November 13-15, 2014 in Winnipeg, Manitoba) by the conference steering committee with the assistance of a larger group of child care policy experts from across the country. Participate in the on-line discussion of this vision of early childhood education and child care on Facebook (ChildCare2020), or through Twitter (@childcare2020). Sign up for the ChildCare2020 e-letter at www.childcare2020.ca.