

Newfoundland & Labrador Association of
Social Workers

Provincial Early Childhood Learning Strategy

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers

Written Submission

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Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW)

The NLASW is the professional association and regulatory body for over 1300 professional social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. The mandate of the NLASW is to ensure excellence in social work. As a profession, social work is committed to improving the well-being of individuals, families and communities through intervention and counselling, collaboration, research, health promotion, policy and program development, and community capacity building.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the profession of social work is diverse with social workers practicing in various settings. In the pursuit of excellence in social work, the NLASW is actively engaged in social policy analysis. In this submission, it is our intention to provide input and recommendations into the development of the Early Childhood Learning Strategy for the province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL).

Early Childhood Learning Strategy

The draft vision, mission and guiding principles as outlined in the discussion guide *Developing a Provincial Early Childhood Learning Strategy* sets the framework for early learning in NL. A “seamless, integrated continuum of early learning opportunities” for children is ideal from a child development perspective. We also know that early learning and child care sets the stage for future academic success and life-long learning. In addition, according to the World Health Organization (2008), “investments in the early years, provides one of the greatest potentials to reduce health inequities within a generation.” It is therefore timely that the Department of Education is engaging in a process to develop a strategy that will meet the early learning needs of children and their families in NL.

This written submission explores several areas that need to be considered in moving this strategy forward. These areas include the importance of collaboration and community involvement; the link between early learning and child care; the impact of poverty reduction strategies; and the importance of evaluation.

Key Recommendations – A Social Work Perspective

Collaboration and Community Involvement

While it is recognized that the Department of Education is taking the lead on the development of a provincial early childhood learning strategy, social workers agree that early childhood learning requires a coordinated approach across several government departments to ensure that the social determinants of health are adequately addressed. The development and implementation of an early childhood learning strategy needs to intersect with, and support, other initiatives that are happening within NL (e.g. poverty reduction strategy, immigration strategy, strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities, provincial wellness plan, and the early learning and child care strategy).

Community involvement is also crucial to moving this strategy forward. It is important that government continue to work with communities to develop and enhance opportunities for early learning in all regions of the province, and to explore lessons learned from provincial initiatives, such as the primary health care strategy, that emphasizes community building and involvement. While programming may not look the same in every community, it is important that the core principles for early learning and program development be addressed. Programming based on the core principles will allow for provincial consistency, and some regional flexibility.

In review of the core principles as outlined in the discussion document, it also would be important to include community capacity building as a core principle. Communities have a significant role to play in enhancing early childhood learning and promoting social inclusion and health promotion. Access to information, services and supports on early learning and child development within the community (e.g., community centres, family resource programs, etc), will allow for more parental involvement and partnership opportunities.

Investments in literacy programming which promotes early learning is also important in supporting children and families. Literacy programs, within early child care, and through connections with family resource centres and community-based services

need to be supported. At an early age, access to literacy programs not only supports child development, but also engages parents in early learning and strengthens the connection to the education session.

Early Learning in Child Care

While the issue of child care is not specifically addressed in the discussion guide, child care is captured within the proposed vision for the early childhood learning strategy: *“Children from birth to age six and their families will have access to a range of supports, services, and early childhood programs that will enhance early childhood learning”*. Early learning and child care are not mutually exclusive. It is therefore recommended that child care and the provincial strategy on early learning and child care also be addressed within, or strongly linked to, this strategy.

The lack of affordable, accessible, and high quality regulated child care, is concerning to social workers. So often, children are put at a disadvantage by the time they enter kindergarten, as opportunities for early learning, and social and emotional development, are not readily available or accessible. Statistics from the Canadian Council on Social Development (2006) showed that in 2003/2004, only 15.5% of children aged 0-12 years had access to regulated child care. While the number of regulated child care spaces has increased, the supply is not meeting the current demand in this province.

According to a report by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (2009) to inform the NL Youth Retention and Attraction Strategy of NL, youth see access to child care and early child development services as integral in supporting families in this province. It is therefore recommended that affordable, high quality, and accessible early child care learning and child care programs be developed and implemented to promote inclusion and healthy child development.

Poverty Reduction

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, as cited in Campaign 2000 (2006), the reduction of child and family poverty is a “precondition for successful childcare and education systems”. It is acknowledged that Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) has made significant strides in reducing poverty through the provincial poverty reduction strategy. According to Campaign 2000 (2009), the child poverty rate in 2007 was 13%, which is down from 23.1% in 2004 (Campaign 2000, 2006). While poverty rates are improving, we know that there are many children and families who continue to live in and experience poverty daily. We also know that the economic gap between the rich and poor continues to widen. According to the Canadian Public Health Association (2008), this gap in Canada, grew by 37% from 1980 – 2005.

It is recommended that government maintain poverty reduction as one of its’ primary goals. In the development of an early childhood learning strategy, it is recommended that all programs and policies be analyzed through a “poverty lens” to ensure fairness, equality and inclusion.

Evaluation

It is recommended that an evaluation process be included in the strategy. How will we know we have been successful in creating early learning opportunities for children ages 0-6 years? It would be important to outline success indicators and how they will be measured. This is important in terms of fiscal and program accountability and in increasing community awareness.

Conclusion

The development and implementation of an early childhood learning strategy is important to the overall health and well-being of children and families in NL. Therefore, it is important that this strategy intersect and link with other key initiatives happening in

this province, and involve the community as a key stakeholder, to ensure that there are no gaps in the delivery of services and that there is a coordinated focus on early learning. Social workers look forward to continuing to work with government in informing policy and program development in moving this strategy forward.

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