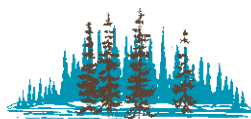
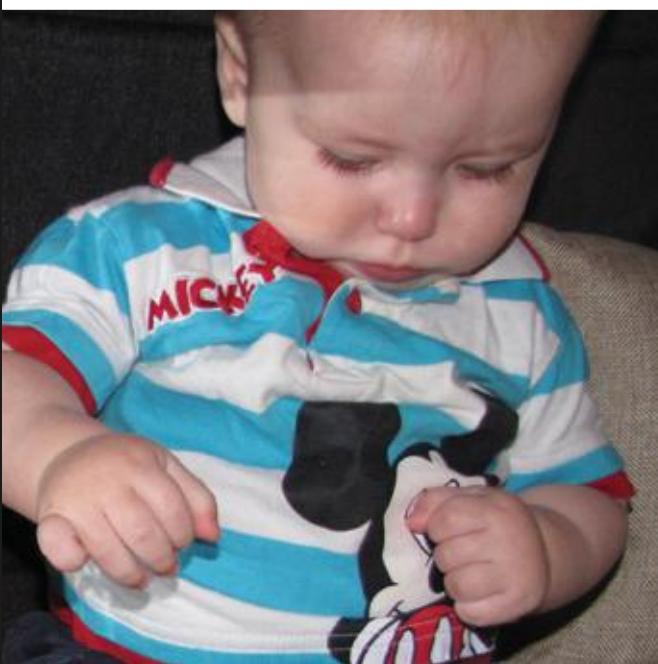


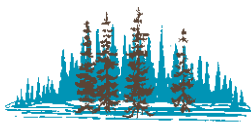
Children and Families in the New Saskatchewan: A Discussion of Early Learning and Child Care



The Muttart Foundation

Prepared by The Muttart Foundation

1150 Scotia Place
10060 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
T5J 3R8
www.muttart.org



The Muttart Foundation

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Preface

Today's families with young children face opportunities and challenges very different from those of the past. Over the last two generations, families and the nature of family life have undergone profound changes. Canadians now become parents later in life, live in more varied family structures, have fewer children, and as parents of young children are much more likely to join or remain in the workforce.

These changes are not unique to Canada, or to individual provinces. Indeed, across North America, Europe and beyond the majority of countries have begun to consider and respond to the many implications that flow from them – most notably the ways in which families must increasingly balance the demands of work inside and outside of the home with those of raising young children.

The nature of modern economies, in which the majority of parents with young children work, and the science of the early years, which highlights the role early experiences play in shaping a child's development, have prompted a rethinking of how to support the early learning and care of our youngest citizens. The importance of helping all children get the best possible start in life is clear; how this can best be achieved, however, is more complex. At minimum, ensuring that a child's early years of life are filled with supportive relationships, stimulating environments and rich experiences both inside and outside of the home demands the consideration of key questions. How can we best design, fund and deliver services? What are the values and principles that shape how we think about children and childhood? And what are our individual and collective responsibilities in supporting children's well-being?

As international studies attest, Canada has fallen behind other countries in its support for early childhood education and care. And while all the provinces have, to some degree, begun to rethink their support for children and families, there is much to be done before all children have access to the supports and services they need during the early years.

The Muttart Foundation has prepared the current paper to encourage Saskatchewan early childhood education and care stakeholders to consider how the province might best approach its support for early learning and child care. The Foundation released a similar paper to support stakeholder

discussions in Alberta¹ in fall 2010. The report resulted in two rounds of community forums and contributed to the development of a draft design for a provincial framework for early learning and care².

The following discussion paper, prepared with the support of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, and drawing on a series of conversations with early childhood educators in the province and beyond, is intended to serve as a starting point for further, richer discussions of early learning and care in Saskatchewan. The rethinking of how the province might best support the early learning and care of its youngest citizens requires input from many stakeholders. It demands an exploration of the values and ideals that are foundational to early learning and child care, as well as the consideration of what research and practice tell us about the nature of the work and the policies and guidelines that support its effective organization, funding and delivery.

Advancing significant change in the funding and delivery of early childhood education and care is complex and challenging. The ideas from one jurisdiction cannot simply be transferred to another, although the comparative analysis of different service landscapes can help to clarify the starting points for successful change. The development of sound public policy, the design and delivery of effective services, and improved outcomes for children and their families requires a deep understanding of the nature of early education and care as well as the values and priorities that underpin it.

How Saskatchewan stakeholders think about and plan for the future of early learning and child care will draw on research findings, as well as the province's political, economic, social and educational cultures. The focus must remain, however, on that which remains in the best interests of children and their families.

¹ Muttart Foundation. 2010. In the Best Interests of Children and Families: A Discussion of Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta.

² Muttart Foundation. 2013. Toward a Provincial Framework for Early Learning and Care in Alberta. What We Heard: A Report on Fall 2012 Consultations with Early Learning and Care Stakeholders.

Muttart Foundation. 2013. Toward a Provincial Framework for Early Learning and Care in Alberta. A Draft Framework Design for Discussion.



Introduction

Over the last decade, almost all of the provinces and territories have made efforts to increase the quantity and quality of early learning and child care for young children and their families. These efforts are responses to the growing number of children below school age who spend much of their early years in some form of non-parental care outside of the family home as well as the realization that early experiences have a profound impact on children's lives now and into the future.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in its review of early childhood education and care in Canada, almost a decade ago, called on the provinces to develop comprehensive strategic plans for early childhood services including clear goals, annual service targets, funding guidelines and agreed outcomes (OECD, 2004). And while no province has reached this recommended state, there has been some progress in a number of provinces including Quebec, Manitoba, Ontario and most recently in Prince Edward Island and Alberta.

The Saskatchewan government has similarly responded to the province's growing population of young children. The Ministry of Education has increased its investments in early learning and child care (Government of Saskatchewan, 2012), while acknowledging the need for longer term solutions to address the challenges at hand – including the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators.

The challenges provinces face as they consider how best to support the early learning and child care of young children have much in common. The incremental growth of programs, often with differing mandates, and the absence of broader strategic service plans, has contributed to what is commonly described as a 'patchwork' of services. Programs are unevenly distributed, often isolated from each other and, in many cases, struggle to remain financially viable. While there are examples of strong, high-quality programs many others find it difficult to meet the complex needs of children and their families.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the initial response of provinces and territories has centred on the search for individual or

local solutions; a reflection of the view that early learning and care is primarily a private responsibility rather than a more public one (Friendly and Prentice, 2012). Community groups and parents have borne much of the burden for developing, operating and supporting services despite their lack of access to the scale and nature of the resources required to fulfill these roles.

The emerging body of comparative literature reveals the deeper-rooted challenges "such as lack of adequate financing, unfavourable staff:child ratios, poorly qualified and poorly remunerated staff and inadequate pedagogical theory and implementation" that are common obstacles to the delivery of accessible, high-quality, affordable early childhood education and care (Bennett, J. 2004 cited in Friendly, Doherty and Beach, 2006). It supports a rethinking of traditional approaches and the focus on individual or local initiatives and highlights instead the need for broader public policy solutions to the challenges facing the field (OECD, 2012: Penn, 2009).

While much of this research is relatively new, Canada, and the provinces, have an important opportunity to learn from the work underway in other countries with different approaches to children's services. These comparative studies, in which Canada participated for the first time in the 2000s, offer insights into how policy options shape services "on the ground" and what "works best", in what contexts, and under what circumstances (OECD, 2001, 2006 and 2012).

With these ideas in mind, The Muttart Foundation has prepared the current discussion paper to serve as a starting point for thinking about how best to advance early learning and child care in Saskatchewan. It is intended to stimulate discussions among stakeholders (including senior staff involved in service delivery, support organizations, policy makers, researchers, as well as staff from post-secondary educational institutions) that reveal points of agreement as well as areas of divergence or disagreement. It may also, through its presentation of policies and practices from Canada and beyond, help to stimulate new thinking on how to advance the field.

By way of definition, the term early learning and child care in the paper is used to refer to those programs and services for children below the mandatory school age that include both physical care and early education or learning (for example, centre-based child care, regulated family child care, preschool, prekindergarten and kindergarten). This use of the term is consistent with its application in the research and policy literature including the large body of work developed by the OECD.

Across Canada there is some variation in the terms used to describe early learning and child care. It is referred to by various names (“early childhood education and care”, “early learning and care”, and “high-quality child care”) which describe sometimes different collections of services. The Saskatchewan government uses two main terms: “early learning and child care” which refers to full-day centres for 0-5 year olds, school-aged (after school) programs and licensed family child care homes; and “Early childhood education” which refers to pre-kindergarten. Kindergarten represents the entry point to the regular school continuum of K-12 programs (Government of Saskatchewan, 2013).

The current paper’s focus on early learning and child care for children below the mandatory school age does not minimize the need to consider the parallel services provided for young school-age children, nor does it negate the need to consider the links with other services and supports such as parental leave, community public health or family resource programs (Muhajarine et al, 2012). A range of complementary and interrelated services help parents support their children’s early development while strengthening families more generally (Neudorf et al, 2012).

The paper comprises three main sections that follow this introduction.

- Section two outlines some of the key demographic, social and economic changes underway in the province. It includes information on the changing nature of family life, as well as the economic changes reshaping the province and its traditional institutions.
- Section three summarizes Saskatchewan’s current approach to the organization, funding and delivery of early learning and child care. It presents information on the services available and outlines some of the main challenges that confront parents and service providers.
- Section four draws on the findings from comparative research to present some ideas on how a Saskatchewan early learning and child care system might be designed and implemented to raise the quantity and quality of services in the province. The ideas presented reflect the findings from research, build on the foundations already in place, and take into account the cultural, economic and social factors that shape services in the province.

The discussion of how best to approach early learning and child care demands some consideration of the starting assumptions or principles that underpin services and their delivery. These are especially important in early learning and child care given its reach into the lives of young children and their families and the influence of differing perspectives on the appropriate division between private and public responsibilities for child and family well-being.

With these considerations in mind, the paper starts from the following four premises.

- Early learning and child care is a public good as well as a shared private/public responsibility. Done well it provides benefits to children and their families as well as the broader communities of which they are part.
- All children benefit from access to high-quality early learning and child care. It supports their early learning, provides them with opportunities for socialization and contributes to their sense of belonging and community. Poor quality early learning and child care is not “educational” and may do harm especially for those children who are the most vulnerable.
- The integration of early learning and child care policies and practices helps to ensure that services meet the differing needs of children and their families. Families benefit from access to a range of services and supports available at the local level that provide them with options and choices – this includes families whose children have special needs.
- The active public planning and management of early learning and child care is most effective in supporting integration, in fostering equity of access, and in developing and sustaining high-quality services. The public management of services can further provide families with opportunities to participate in decision-making around the nature and form of services themselves.

The 'New Saskatchewan' – A Strong Economy and Changing Families

Over the last decade Saskatchewan has undergone a series of economic and social changes. While some reflect those taking place in Canada as a whole, others speak to a reshaping of the province as a centre for both economic and demographic growth (McGrane, 2011). The province has moved further away from its rural roots. Its cities and towns have grown and its economy has taken on a greater natural resource and energy focus. The results include a reversal of the recent historic patterns of outmigration and an increase in the number of residents, including families, who call the province home.

These changes provide important contexts for thinking about how best to approach the design, funding and delivery of early learning and child care. As in other provinces, the daily lives of families with young children are very different from those of families of one or two generations ago. The following section outlines some of the economic and social changes underway in the province.

A Vibrant Provincial Economy

While Saskatchewan's agricultural origins remain an important part of its cultural and social fabric, their contributions to its economy have faded. The farming sector's share of the provincial economy has fallen significantly over the last decade or so – following a gradual

decline that some authors trace back to the late 1930s and the depression and droughts that followed (Anderson, 2007). The non-renewable resources and energy sectors and a growing modern service economy in Saskatoon and Regina now form the mainstays of a vibrant provincial economy. These recent developments have prompted a number of commentators to remark that Saskatchewan has been transformed from a 'have not' to a 'have' province - with economic indicators suggesting that this new found strength will continue into the foreseeable future (Keatings et al, 2012).

The province's strong economic growth places it at or near the top of many national economic measures. Its Gross Domestic Product rose 4.9 percent between 2011 and 2012; in early 2013 its employment level reached an all-time high while its seasonally-unadjusted unemployment rate fell to 3.8 percent - the lowest rate in Canada (Government of Saskatchewan, Monthly Indicators Report, 2013). It has similarly experienced increases in housing and industrial starts, real wages growth and retail sales - all indications of strong economic growth.

During the recent recession, Saskatchewan was the only province to maintain a balanced budget and saw a significant reduction in its net debt to GDP ratio between 2002 and 2012 as a result of its growing resource revenues. The 2012-13 provincial budget, refers to the 'Saskatchewan Advantage' linked to a combination of prudent spending, low tax rates and a strong provincial economy that the government credits with encouraging people to move to the province in growing numbers (Government of Saskatchewan, 2012).

There are, however, some cautions that not all residents are sharing equitably in the boom. A recent analysis of economic changes in the province reveals that income inequality has increased since 2000, with the share of after-tax income for those families with lower incomes falling in relative terms. As the study notes, however, this is a trend that is not unique to Saskatchewan and is evident across Canada (Gingrich, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2013).

Canada Without Poverty, a national anti-poverty group, cites several factors that contribute to inequity: "urban migration, increasing living costs and a high rate of poverty within the Aboriginal population" (2012). Campaign 2000, further advises that while Saskatchewan's child poverty rate (and its poverty rates more generally) has recently fallen, it is still close to 13 percent — a rate that exceeds UNICEF's minimum international benchmark of 10 percent (Campaign 2000, 2012; UNICEF 2008). In 2012, Saskatchewan had the second highest number of families

with children using food banks in Canada (Neudorf et al, 2012).

The province's strong financial position provides it with some options to address these challenges, a position advanced in the 2012-13 provincial budget which includes a focus on increasing 'affordability' for identified groups including students, seniors and families (Government of Saskatchewan, 2012). The province's history of a collective approach to social issues may further support its efforts to reduce income inequality (Leeson, 2008).

A Growing Provincial Population

Spurred by recent economic growth, the Saskatchewan population reached an all-time high in 2013 at 1,089,807 (Government of Saskatchewan, 2013) and in 2012 the province was the second-fastest growing in Canada. The increased movement of people into the province, allied with the youthful nature of the adult population, accounts for much of this growth (Statistics Canada, 2012). The provincial government forecasts population increases into the foreseeable future given the strong economy and the high quality of life available to residents. This view is reflected in the phrase "the old Saskatchewan was the place to be from; the new Saskatchewan is the place to be" (Mandyrk, 2010, quoted in McGrane, 2011).

The province's recent growth represents a significant turnaround from the previous decades when the population level was either stagnant or fell. The post-war 'baby booms' of the 1950s and 1960s were replaced by a 'baby bust' - with a smaller 'echo boom' in the later 1970s and 1980s. This was followed by a further period of decline from 1986 to 2006 (Anderson, 2007). Between 2006 and 2011, however, there was a close to 20 percent increase in children aged 4 and under (Statistics Canada, 2013) as families with young children chose either to remain in the province or to move there for the economic opportunities available.

Today, the population profile, buoyed by economic growth, has two unique characteristics (Government of Saskatchewan, 2013). First, it is home to a large proportion of adults under the age of 24 - with an estimated additional 200,000 young adults anticipated to enter the workforce over the next 15 years. Second, there is a significant and growing proportion of Aboriginal people who comprise over 15 percent of the provincial population. The provincial government forecasts that this population will continue to

increase and that by 2045 Aboriginal peoples will make up around one third of the provincial population. Together, these two demographic characteristics have the potential to reshape the province's socio-economic landscape over the coming decades.

The Changing Nature of Families with Young Children

The recent economic and demographic changes in the province are reflected in the composition and structure of Saskatchewan families. Saskatchewan families, in common with those in other regions of Canada, have undergone significant changes over the last two decades. Interprovincial and international migration have brought a growing number of new families to the province, while the recent 'baby boom' and emerging social trends have resulted in a greater variation of family types and structures.

The province is home to 285,375 census families which represents an increase of 6.7 percent from 2006 to 2011 - the second largest rate of increase amongst the provinces (Saskatchewan Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Married couples form the most common family type, comprising just over 70 percent of all families. The number and proportion of lone parent families, however, continues to increase, with one in six families headed by a lone parent - three-quarters of which are women. The number and proportion of common-law couples is also increasing and these couples now form 12.5 percent of all families - albeit a lower proportion than that in other provinces (Statistics Canada, 2013).

The recent 'baby boom' is reflected in the statistic that one in five families include children five years of age and under - with 79,470 children in the province under 6 years of age. Between 2006 and 2011 the number of children aged 4 and under grew by close to 20 percent and the province's fertility rate reached 2.06; the highest among the provinces and just below the natural replacement rate of 2.1 children per women of child bearing age.

Of those families with children at home (including adult children), 6 out of ten are married couples, 3 out of ten are lone-parent families (the majority headed by women) and 1 in ten are common-law couples. A growing family type is that of the blended or step-family (the product of the dissolution of one family unit with children and the formation of another). In 2011, there were 14,610 stepfamilies in the province representing 13.5 percent

of total couples with children (Saskatchewan Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

The new realities families with young children face in balancing the demands of work inside and outside of the family home are also evident in Saskatchewan, just as they are across the country. Changing social roles and the strong provincial economy have led to an increase in the proportion of parents of young children in the work force. Saskatchewan mothers participate in the paid labour force at rates which exceed the Canadian average for younger children and are among the highest in Canada for mothers of school-age children – 69 percent with a youngest child under 3 years of age; 75 percent with a 3-5 year old, and 82 percent with a 6-15 year old (Statistics Canada, n. d. CANSIM Table 282-0210).



The Growing Urbanization of the Province

Saskatchewan families with young children are now also more likely to live in one of the province's growing urban centres than ever before. Between 2006 and 2011 the cities of Saskatoon and Regina were among the fastest growing urban metropolitan areas in Canada. During this period, the populations of Saskatoon and Regina grew by 11.4 percent and 8 percent respectively and in 2011 accounted for 46 percent of the total provincial population. By comparison, the average annual growth rate for the rest of the province during the same period was much lower at 0.4 percent (Statistics Canada, 2012).

Across the province, the proportion of the population living in an urban centre climbed to 65 percent (Government of Saskatchewan, 2012) with above average growth in those secondary or regional level centres benefiting directly from the new economic growth, for example Lloydminster and Estevan. By contrast, there were lower levels of population growth in other regional centres such as Moose Jaw, Prince Albert and Yorkton.

The Movement of New Residents to the Province

The economic boom has further resulted in a sharp increase in the number of people moving to the province from across Canada and internationally; although the number of international migrants is still relatively small in comparison to other provinces. Between 2006 and 2011 the province was the destination for 28,000 immigrants; a three-fold increase from the 9,500 who moved there in the previous five year period. The province similarly saw a net gain of 12,000 new residents from interprovincial migration between 2006 and 2011, a sharp contrast to the previous five year period which saw a net loss of 35,000 residents. The provincial government forecasts that both of these trends will continue in the short and medium terms.

The provincial government has recently moved to attract higher numbers of immigrants to the province through its Immigrant Nominee Program and hopes to attract at least 10,000 new immigrants per year as part of its economic growth strategy (Elliot, 2012). Between July 1, 2011 and June 30, 2012 the province attracted 11,437 immigrants to the province - although the proportion of the provincial population born outside of Canada remains significantly lower than the national average -

around 8 percent as compared to around 21 percent. The proportion of immigrants is somewhat higher in the two major metropolitan centres of Saskatoon and Regina in which immigrants comprise 10.7 and 10.5 percent of the population. These proportions, however, are also lower than the equivalent rates for other major metropolitan areas across Canada (Statistics Canada. 2013).

A Young, Growing Aboriginal Population

Saskatchewan is home to one of the largest and fastest growing Aboriginal populations, comprising First Nations (who live both on and off reserve) and Métis populations, in Canada. Between one in six and one in seven Saskatchewan residents report an Aboriginal identity - a much higher proportion than the national figure of around one in 25.

The province's Aboriginal population is young and growing. Fifty-four percent of those residents who report an Aboriginal identity are under 24 years of age with 34 percent under 15 years of age. Approximately three in ten children 0 to 5 years of age in the province are of Aboriginal heritage (HRSDC, 2012).

Aboriginal families with young children also differ in their form from families as a whole. Just over 40 percent of Aboriginal children 14 years of age and under live in

a family with both of their parents while 42.5 percent live with a lone-parent. A larger proportion of Aboriginal children are either stepchildren (8.3 percent) or live with their grandparents or other relatives (5.6 percent) than non-Aboriginal children. A further 3.2 percent of Aboriginal children live in foster care families. The youthful age of the Aboriginal population and its high fertility rates leads to forecasts that Aboriginal peoples will comprise around one-third of the provincial population by 2045.

A larger proportion of Aboriginal families face some measure of economic uncertainty as compared to non-Aboriginal families. Canada Without Poverty notes that unemployment rates for Aboriginal peoples are twice the national average, with almost 40 percent of Aboriginal women and one in four First Nations children living in poverty. Aboriginal families are much more likely to experience poor living conditions, such as a lack of running water and overcrowded housing, than non-Aboriginal people (Canada Without Poverty, 2012).

Just over half (53 percent) of those individuals who identify as First Nations live on reserves in the province, with the bulk of the non-reserve population living in the major centres of Saskatoon, Regina and Prince Albert. Residents who report an Aboriginal identity (First Nations or Metis) comprise just over 10 percent of the populations of Regina and Saskatoon and just under 40 percent of the population of Prince Albert (Government of Saskatchewan, Bureau of Statistics, 2013).



Early Learning and Child Care in Saskatchewan

The majority of young children in Saskatchewan participate in some form of early learning and child care outside of their family home before they enter public education around age six. This social and educational norm mirrors the experiences of children across Canada as families balance the demands of paid and non-paid work with those of raising children (UNICEF, 2008; Kershaw and Anderson, 2011, Muhajarine et al, 2012).

The realization that high quality early learning and child care, shaped through public policy, can foster early childhood development, support the higher levels of parental employment upon which modern economies depend, reduce family and child poverty and increase the equity of opportunity for children and their families has informed the public responses to these changes in many different countries. Indeed, there is growing support for the argument that investing in early learning and care “pays off” among the public, opinion leaders and policy makers (Alexander and Ignjatovic, 2012; Fortin et al, 2012; Pascal, 2009; Muhajarine et al, 2012; Heckman, 2008).

Today, universal access to relatively well integrated, publicly supported early learning and child care for children between three years and compulsory school age is the norm in most of the world’s wealthy countries, while a number of OECD countries also treat child care for 0-3 years olds as an entitlement (OECD, 2006; UNICEF, 2008; Kaga, Bennett, and Moss, 2010). Policy makers now better understand how to respond to the “great change coming over childhood” through a broad package of family supports and services (Muhajarine et al, 2012), including early learning and care, to ensure that all children have access to “loving, stable, secure and stimulating relationships with caregivers in the earliest months and years of life” (UNICEF, 2008).

In Canada, however, families still have limited access to high quality early learning and child care. There remains an absence of well-developed national and provincial policies, with the constitutional arrangements that make up the country’s relatively weak federal system and the prevailing view that the primary responsibility for early learning and care lies with parents and/or families seen by some researchers as significant barriers to change (Hertzman and Williams, 2009; White and Friendly, 2012).

Despite these barriers, the majority of provinces and territories have, since the cancellation of the national early learning and child care strategy in 2006, undertaken policy initiatives— both modest and some more comprehensive—to advance change (Friendly and Beach, 2013). Although none to date has developed a comprehensive policy framework or approach that ensures access to high-quality services for a majority of young children, there are some signs of progress.

Saskatchewan’s Approach to Early Learning and Child Care

Over the last two decades, the provincial government has introduced a number of changes to how it organizes, funds and delivers early learning and child care. In 1996, for example, the province introduced publicly funded prekindergarten for vulnerable children; in 2000 it implemented operating grants for child care services; in 2004 it moved to a regional delivery model and increased the educational requirements for early childhood educators; and in 2006 Saskatchewan was the first province to move regulated child care into the education department (then Saskatchewan Learning).

The province also took part in the OECD’s international study of early learning and child care as one of the four provinces (Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia) to participate as part of the Canada case-study. The report’s recommendations included support for a publicly managed, integrated approach to the funding and delivery of services (OECD, 2004).

In 2004, the Department of Community Resources and Employment and the Department of Learning sponsored forums to consider a framework for a ‘blended approach’ to early learning and care – with stakeholders supporting this new approach (Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Unit, 2004). And in 2005, the provincial government sponsored a ‘sector study’ to consider how the province might support a ‘systematic, child and family

focused approach to early learning and care' as part of its agreement to participate in the cancelled National Early Learning and Child Care Strategy. The study placed a specific focus on the human resource and training needs for early childhood educators (Rochon Associated, 2006).

More recently, the provincial government has increased its public investments in early learning and child care and dedicated new resources to prekindergarten for vulnerable children and their families (Government of Saskatchewan, Ministry of Education, 2013).

Despite these initiatives and new investments, many families with young children still face challenges in accessing affordable, high quality early learning and child care (Neudorf et al, 2012). The province's recent population growth and strong economy have placed additional pressures on service providers - challenges similar to those reported in other provinces including Alberta (Muttart Foundation, 2010).

The following descriptions outline how the province approaches the organization, funding and delivery of services. There are also some comparisons included to show how the services in Saskatchewan compare to those in other provinces.

The Organization of Early Learning and Child Care

Saskatchewan's early learning and child care programs - kindergarten, prekindergarten and regulated child care - are consolidated under the oversight of the Ministry of Education. Prekindergarten and regulated child care form part of the Ministry's Early Years Branch, while kindergarten is part of the Education Funding Branch. The Ministry of Social Services operates the child care subsidy program for eligible low income households.

Community organizations (non-profits) and public schools deliver the bulk of services with a small number of municipalities also playing a direct service delivery role. Kindergarten and prekindergarten programs (which target vulnerable families) are publicly funded and publicly delivered, while child care centres and family day homes derive much of their revenues from parent fees and receive more limited public funding to cover a portion of their operating costs. The mix of services varies between communities reflecting patterns of demand as well as the capacity of community organizations to respond to local service needs.

The 2013-14 provincial budget includes allocations of \$50.5 million for child care funding, \$18.2 million for prekindergarten programs and \$16.2 million for child care parent subsidies (Government of Saskatchewan, 2013). The provincial 2013-14 financial estimates also include an estimated \$70 to \$75 million in funding for part-day kindergarten (based on a projected enrollment of 13,500 students and a per student funding amount of 0.5 X \$10,921).

The Delivery of Early Learning and Child Care Programs and Services

Kindergarten

Kindergarten is delivered in publicly funded schools (including denominational schools - ordinarily Roman Catholic schools) through elected school boards and in independent (private) schools, which are not publicly funded. It is provided for five-year olds with provincial funding supporting the cost of a part-day program.

Kindergarten is not mandatory but the vast majority of age-eligible children attend. It is also not an entitlement (its provision is determined by the school division), but all 29 school divisions provide it. There is no provincial class size limit in kindergarten and no provincially set entry age; these are determined by the school division. Kindergarten teachers hold the same teaching certification as elementary teachers. The kindergarten curriculum incorporates a play-based approach to learning with a focus on three broad learning areas: children as lifelong learners; supporting children's development of a sense of self, community and place; and children as engaged citizens (Ministry of Education, 2010).

The Saskatoon Public School Division and the Greater Saskatoon Catholic School Division supported full-day kindergarten programs up until 2012. Both divisions cancelled these programs in summer 2012 given the growing pressures on school budgets. The results from a preliminary evaluation of full-day kindergarten in three regions of the province showed that programs were most beneficial for those students encountering some educational challenges such as poorer language skills (Muhajarine et al, 2007).

Prekindergarten

The Ministry of Education allocates funding to school divisions that operate ministry-designated prekindergarten programs. Prekindergarten operates as a targeted program for children who live in ‘vulnerable circumstances’.

Children are considered vulnerable based on a series of family, developmental and environmental risk criteria assessed and weighted at the school division level.

The prekindergarten program guidelines cover staff qualifications, staff to child ratios, class size, facility requirements, parent engagement, and the minimum hours of operation. School divisions deliver most prekindergarten programs in school settings, although they may also partner with community organizations to deliver services.

Prekindergarten is usually offered three hours/day for four days/week for a minimum of 12 hours per week. While the program is primarily for three- and four-year-olds, school divisions may enroll younger or older children. There are no parent fees but there may be waiting lists. Schools develop their prekindergarten programs based on guidelines established by the Ministry. They are also required to submit annual program reports as well as assessment and evaluation plans.

Saskatchewan’s prekindergarten program is Canada’s only fully public-funded early education program that includes three-year-olds on a regular basis. While several provinces have some prekindergarten for targeted (at-risk or special needs) four-year-olds, and Ontario’s “junior” kindergarten program is universally for all four-year-olds, none of these is aimed at three-year-olds.

The Saskatchewan government has committed to continue to increase the number of prekindergarten programs. In 2012 there were 283 prekindergarten programs (serving 4,528 children) across the province – a significant increase from the original 26 programs introduced in 1996. The Ministry of Education estimates that there are approximately 6,700 vulnerable children 3 and 4 years of age in the province (Government of Saskatchewan, Ministry of Education Plan for 2013-14). In 2013, the education minister identified the “goal . . . to have all four-year-olds in Prekindergarten in the future” (Regina Star-Phoenix, 2013).

Regulated child care

Regulated child care and unregulated child care are respectively termed licensed and “exempt from licensing” in Saskatchewan. Regulated child care includes full-day child care centres and regulated family child care.

Approximately two-thirds of the regulated spaces are in centre-based care, twenty-one percent in family child care homes and 11 percent in school-aged programs in 2010 (Friendly and Beach, 2013). Compared to other provinces, Saskatchewan has a higher proportion of its spaces in regulated family child care homes.

Child care centres provide early learning and care for children in group settings. They are licensed by the Early Learning and Child Care Branch and provide care for up to 90 children from six weeks of age. They can be incorporated as non-profit or for-profit organizations but historically have been almost exclusively non-profit. There are currently only 61 for-profit regulated child care spaces in the province. Municipal governments may also operate or support child care centres. There were 112 municipal child care spaces in 2012 (Friendly, Halfon, Beach and Forer, 2013). Saskatchewan is the only province that does not provide public funds, including fee subsidies, to for-profit child care centres. The Manitoba government permits for-profit centres to receive fee subsidies but limits its operational support to non-profit service providers (HRSDC, 2012).

The provincial government directly licenses regulated family child care in Saskatchewan. There are two forms of regulated family child care. Regulated family child care homes provide care for up to eight children, depending on the children’s ages, and are operated by individually licensed family child care providers in a residence. Group family child care homes are operated by individually licensed caregivers assisted by another adult caregiver for up to 12 children.

Saskatchewan also provides specialized child care centres and family child care homes for teen high school student parents, teen student support centres and teen student support family child care homes.

The Ministry of Education introduced an early learning and child care program guide in 2008: *‘Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide’* (Government of Saskatchewan, Ministry of Education, 2008). The guide is intended for use in a range of early learning settings. The Ministry has developed additional resources to support the use of the guide and supports professional development opportunities for early childhood educators to foster their use of the learning resources in partnership with the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association. The Ministry does not require regulated services to use the program guide.

Saskatchewan provides a range of funding supports to regulated, non-profit child care services including capital grants, start-up funds, operating grants and grants for specialized programs. Currently, the two largest categories of public funds are *Early Childhood Services Grants* (operating grants to services) and the *Fee Subsidy Program* (partial fee replacement for eligible low income families).

Over the last decade, the province has increased its public investments in child care services. Between 2007 and 2012 the number of licensed child care spaces rose from 8,850 to 12,275 - an increase of 3,425 spaces (Government of Saskatchewan, Ministry of Education, 2013). Despite these increases Saskatchewan still has amongst the lowest rates of regulated child care per eligible child amongst the provinces (HRSDC, 2012; Neudorf et al, 2012). Based on 2011 Census data, the province has regulated child care or family day home spaces for approximately one in five (18 percent) children below the mandatory school age, with an additional 4,500 part-day prekindergarten spaces for vulnerable three and four-year-old children. Overall, families have lower levels of access to regulated early learning and care spaces than in the neighbouring Prairie provinces of Alberta and Manitoba (Muttart Foundation, 2012; Friendly, Halfon, Beach and Forer, 2013).

Unregulated child care

Some early childhood and child care options are not regulated in Saskatchewan, termed “exempt from licensing” – and as a result are not monitored by the provincial government. An unregulated family child care home may care for eight children, including the caregiver’s own (five of these may be younger than six years; of these five, two may be younger than 30 months). Part-time preschools/nursery schools (which operate less than three hours/day or three days/week) are also not regulated – a variation from the common approach in most other provinces where they are regulated and or licensed in a similar way to full-day child care centres. Unregulated preschools may be located in community centres, schools, churches, or private residences. School-aged child care programs in schools are also not regulated.

As in other provinces, recent problems with the safety of unregulated early learning and child care services have prompted the provincial government to consider possible options for licensing previously exempt services. To date, no clear directions have emerged as to how the existing licensing regime might best extend to cover these services.



Aboriginal child care

The Saskatchewan government does not regulate or fund child care services which operate on reserves. These services are the responsibility of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and have been since 2001, when the Federation requested to take on this role. The federally funded First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative has supported the development of approximately 76 on-reserve child care facilities with 1,044 spaces monitored by First Nations. In addition, there are 79 on-reserve Aboriginal Head Start sites and 15 urban/northern Aboriginal Head Start sites. Both Aboriginal Head Start programs are funded by the federal government through Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada respectively.

The Early Learning and Child Care Workforce

Educational Requirements

As in other provinces, the formal educational requirements for early childhood educators are modest. Twenty percent of staff in centre-based child care services must have completed a two-year diploma; 30 percent a one year certificate with the remaining 50 percent required to complete a 120 hour (3 classes) introduction course. Centre directors are also required to have a two-year Early Childhood Education (ECE) diploma course. There is no regulation that specifically requires an ECE with post-secondary training to be present with each group of children in a centre-based child care.

Half the staff in a licensed school-age program are required to have a one-year ECE credential or equivalent. Family child care providers licensed after 2001 are required to take a 40-hour early childhood orientation course within their first year of operation; the licensee in a group family child care home has three years to complete the ECE I (120 hour) orientation course.

The Ministry of Education provides professional development grant funding for staff in licensed child care environments to attend educational sessions in the province. The grant monies are capped per educational session and for each licensed service provider. The Ministry provides staffing stipends to cover staff replacement costs as part of the grant funding program. The Ministry also supports educational workshops including sessions on the use of the provincial program guide and

provides tuition reimbursement for staff in licensed care environments who upgrade their level of qualification.

Remuneration

The remuneration levels for staff are modest. Data from a 2012 national survey conducted by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council³ (Flanagan, Beach and Varmuza, 2012) show that the median hourly wage for Saskatchewan staff in centres for children younger than school-age was \$14.92/hr, the fourth lowest median wage in Canada (Table 1 - Appendix).

Between 1998 and 2012, median wages for staff in Saskatchewan increased \$0.89 from \$14.03 to \$14.92, in adjusted 2012 dollars. This is less than the Canada-wide increase in wages over the same period, and lower than the increase in other provinces which saw early childhood educator wages increase by between 40 percent and 50 percent. Similar data for 2009/10 from the ECEC in Canada 2010 report show the mean gross hourly wages for centre-based child care staff as \$21.90 for directors, \$16.90 for supervisors and \$13.29 for child care workers (HRSDC, 2012).

The low rates of remuneration for early childhood educators present a challenge for staff recruitment and retention both in Saskatchewan and across Canada, and they may also serve to discourage staff from increasing their formal qualifications (Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, 2009).

The Cost of Child Care: Parent Fees and Subsidies

Parent fees for centre-based child care in Saskatchewan are amongst the lowest in Canada (Table 2 - Appendix) with the median cost of an infant space \$650 per month, a toddler space \$561 per month and a preschool age child space \$535 per month (Flanagan, Beach and Varmuza, 2012). Canada's lowest child care fees are in Quebec, where parents pay a flat fee for all ages of \$154 a month (\$7 a day), and in Manitoba, where the provincial government sets a maximum parent fee⁴ and uses a "unit funding" model to financially support regulated child care. Even with these lower median fee levels the cost of early

³ The CCHRSC, which was set up to provide research and data on the human resource aspects of child care. The CCHRSC closed in March 2013 as part of the cancellation of the Government Sector Council program.

⁴ Maximum fees for publicly funded child care services are now set by provincial governments in Prince Edward Island, Quebec and Manitoba.

learning and child care for a two-year old child is \$7,000/year, higher than undergraduate tuition at the University of Regina⁵ and still out of reach for low and modest income families.

Parent Fee subsidies

Saskatchewan provides a fee subsidy program through the Ministry of Social Services to reduce the cost of licensed child care for eligible families. This is generally similar to the models in place in most other provinces⁶. Eligibility for a subsidy depends on why the child care is needed, family income, age of children, family size and provincial region and whether the family can secure a regulated child care space. Parents must be employed (or seeking employment), attending school or a training program or require child care due to their child's special needs to qualify for a subsidy.

Subsidies are provided to families with very low household incomes (gross income⁷) and can only be used at non-profit child care centres or licensed family child care homes. In addition, Saskatchewan requires that a minimum user fee of at least 10 percent of the actual cost of care be paid by subsidized parents. Service providers may surcharge subsidized parents above this, and many do. The average (estimated) surcharge to subsidized parents is 30 to 40 percent of the fee (HRSDC, 2012). The provincial government may pay the parent portion of the fees for families who receive social assistance or who participate in a transitional employment program. Other low income parents must find the funds to pay the surcharge.

The income thresholds the Ministry of Social Services uses to determine eligibility for subsidy are very low. This leaves many families with modest household incomes ineligible for subsidy. In 2010, a family with one child whose gross income was \$19,800 or under a year was eligible for a full subsidy, which was reduced to a zero subsidy when the income reached \$36,721 (Table 3 - Appendix.) These low subsidy thresholds make it very difficult for lower income families to access regulated child care services. In 2010, 3,159 children received some fee subsidy - 500 fewer children than received a subsidy in 1992. The proportion of children who receive a subsidy fell from 54 percent in 2001 to 29 percent in 2010 (Friendly and Beach, 2013).

⁵ \$5,300 in 2013

⁶ Quebec no longer uses a fee subsidy approach.

⁷ Saskatchewan is one of two provinces to use gross, rather than net, income to determine income eligibility

Summing Up

The Government of Saskatchewan has significantly increased its investments in early learning and child care over the last few years and has consolidated the oversight for services in the Ministry of Education. It has placed a focus on increasing the number of prekindergarten programs available for vulnerable children while also supporting an increase in centre-based child care and family child care.

The rapid growth of the province has increased the demand for child care and placed significant pressures on existing service providers, particularly those in the two major centres of Saskatoon and Regina. As in most other provinces, the range of programs and services in place is shaped by a combination of public policy and the ability of community organizations to respond to local needs. This results in families having differing levels of access to services based on where they live, the nature of their family-work lives and their household income.

In comparison to the other Prairie provinces, and much of the rest of Canada, Saskatchewan families have access to a lower supply of services. The child care workforce also remains more poorly paid than the equivalent workforces in Alberta and Manitoba, as well as other regions of Canada.



Reimagining Early Learning and Child Care in Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan's emergence as a centre for economic and population growth – the 'New Saskatchewan' – has led to calls for new public policy that responds to this growth (McGrane, 2011). One key area for this new policy is that of early learning and child care, an area of increasing importance if the province is to remain an attractive place for families with young children to live.

The importance of positive early years experiences to young children's development as well as their future health and well-being, together with the increasing labour force participation of mothers with young children, has led the majority of provinces/territories including Saskatchewan to increase their public investments in early learning and child care. Some, including Prince Edward Island and Ontario, have undertaken more substantial reviews and begun the move toward more integrated and comprehensive service systems. But the redesign of early learning and child care is complex. It demands the consideration of ideas from different fields as well as the accommodation of varying perspectives on childhood, families and the roles and responsibilities of public services.

A 2005 Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy paper argues for "a carefully designed, high-quality early learning and child care system" as the most likely approach to increase families' access to services (Friendly, 2005). It highlights the importance of the public management of services and links to the comparative research that examines how jurisdictions might best approach early childhood education and care (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2012; UNESCO, 2006; Penn, 2009).

As in other provinces, the challenges Saskatchewan families face in accessing affordable, high-quality early learning and child care, and those which service providers face in delivering it, are deep-rooted. They reflect how services have developed over time, how they are organized, funded and delivered, and how the demands placed upon them have increased and changed. Five interrelated challenges stand out which Saskatchewan will need to address to advance early learning and child care.

First, despite recent increases in child care and prekindergarten spaces the supply of regulated services falls significantly short of the projected demand. Parents across the province continue to face challenges in accessing regulated services – a problem exacerbated by the recent increase in the number of families with young children.

Second, the costs of regulated child care (while moderate within the Canadian context) are still out of reach for lower income families. The number of children who receive a subsidy has fallen, as provincial subsidy thresholds have not kept pace with the rising cost of parent fees, while the costs of quality child care have increased. Families that qualify for a full subsidy must still cover a portion of child care costs – costs which they are often unable to afford.

Third, although Saskatchewan was the first province to consolidate responsibility for child care, prekindergarten and kindergarten under a single ministry (Education), subsequent efforts to more closely integrate services have been limited. As in other provinces, there are differences in the goals, pedagogies, financing, human resources and delivery of programs and services with parents required to navigate their way through a range of service environments.

Fourth, the child care regulations which shape practice, such as early childhood educator training, staff to child ratios and the use of curriculum frameworks are modest based on structural measures of program quality. There are no data on the quality of regulated early learning and child care and no assessments of how services contribute to child and family outcomes.

And fifth, early childhood educators in child care settings receive low rates of remuneration and have limited opportunities for career and professional development. As a result, it is difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff – particularly in those communities experiencing strong economic growth where there is competition for educated staff. Early

childhood educators face limited career opportunities and have few incentives to upgrade their education and credentials.

These deep-rooted challenges demand policy solutions which are considered in the comparative research on early childhood education and care (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2012; UNESCO, 2006; UNICEF, 2008; Penn, 2009). This research further emphasizes the importance of ‘contextualizing’ study findings, cautions against the simple transfer of models and practices between jurisdictions and highlights the importance of values and political priorities in shaping services for children and their families.

Drawing on this research, the following sections present some ideas for advancing early learning and child care in Saskatchewan. The options presented are briefly outlined to provide a basis for discussion.

The Starting Point - A New Vision for Early Learning and Child Care in Saskatchewan

The province’s recent economic and population growth provide the drivers for change, as well as an opportunity to rethink the funding and delivery of early learning and child care. The importance of the early years for child development and the changes in families’ lives provide strong arguments for new public policy that better meets the needs of children and their families (UNICEF, 2008; Muhajarine et al, 2012; Neudorf et al, 2012).

The OECD (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2006 and 2012) argues for a systematic and integrated approach to early learning and child care that begins with a broad policy framework to guide the organization and delivery of services, supported by appropriate financing, research and the ongoing monitoring of services. The recent efforts of provincial governments to redesign early learning and child care provide some examples of how to restructure services as well as the challenges that this redesign can bring (Pascal, 2009; Flanagan, 2010; Government of Ontario, Ministry of Education, 2012). Considered together, the findings from these two areas of work provide important insights into the nature of the changes that can be made.

Idea for Consideration

The Development and Implementation of a Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Framework

The starting point for rethinking early learning and child care in Saskatchewan is a new provincial policy framework that guides the redesign of early learning and child care. The Ministry of Education would provide the leadership for the development of the framework, while seeking input from early learning and child care stakeholders and drawing on the relevant policy and practice research.

The Saskatchewan early learning and child care framework would present a broad vision for services, provide a clear statement on their goals and purposes and outline the policy and practice guidelines that shape their organization, delivery and financing. Families would have equitable access to high-quality, seamless services that would be more closely integrated across multiple dimensions including the level of service for all children below the mandatory school age; the education and working conditions of staff; the educational philosophy and approaches that guide practice and the funding, regulation and monitoring of services.

The Saskatchewan early learning and care framework would form an integral part of the provincial government’s long-term plan for the province ‘*The Saskatchewan Plan for Growth – Vision 2020 and Beyond*’ and align with the vision of ‘a strong and growing Saskatchewan, the best place in Canada – to live, to work, to start a business, to get an education, to raise a family and to build a life’ (Government of Saskatchewan, 2013).

The framework would include specific guidelines and direction in respect to the early learning and child care of Aboriginal children. These guidelines would extend to First Nations children living both on-and off-reserve as well as other children with an Aboriginal heritage. The Provincial government would work closely with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, First Nations communities, Aboriginal organizations and existing service providers to reach agreement on how best to ensure that the new framework responds to the needs of Aboriginal children and their families.

The Key Areas for Policy Direction in a Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Framework

Drawing on research studies (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2006 and 2012; UNESCO, 2006; Friendly, Doherty and Beach, 2006) as well as recent government plans (Council of Australian Governments, 2009; Pascal, 2009; Flanagan, 2010; Pascal et al, 2013), five key aspects of an early childhood education and care system stand out that require consideration in a provincial policy framework:

- The vision and goals for early learning and child care;
- The governance and management of early learning and child care;
- The financing of early learning and child care;
- The organization and delivery of services; and
- The quality of services.

While these key elements are discussed individually below, they represent interrelated system components that work together.

The Vision and Goals for Early Learning and Child Care

The intersectoral nature of early learning and care and its inclusion of concepts that are variously interpreted (such as education) results in jurisdictions placing differing emphases on services with varying outcomes in mind (Penn, 2009). Support for children's early learning and care while their families work remains the most common reason for public support, although other interests also shape services: human and economic development; 'school readiness'; overcoming disadvantage for vulnerable children; the well-being of children and their families; child rights and social inclusion (UNESCO, 2006, UNICEF, 2008, Friendly, 2007). The emphasis governments place on these goals reflects their political interests, their views of children, childhood and families, and what they see as the appropriate division between private and public responsibilities for child and family well-being.

One key area of agreement relates to the multi-faceted nature of early learning and its close connection with care (Choi, 2002, OECD, 2001, UNESCO, 2006). Both care and

education are central to the development and learning of young children and cannot be separated in practice.

The question of whether early learning and care should be available for all children whose parents want them to participate or whether services should target particular populations remains important in many jurisdictions, including Canada. The OECD supports a universal approach to access (2001, 2006) and argues that targeting is difficult and may serve to limit broader public support for early learning and care – a point re-emphasized in Canadian research (Hertzman and Bertrand, 2007). The OECD identifies the need, however, to pay particular attention to 'children in need of special support' making sure that services are accessible to these populations (OECD, 2006). The Human Early Learning Partnership at the University of British Columbia extends these arguments. It argues for a universal system of support and services, available to all children, bolstered by additional targeted services for vulnerable children.

Reaching consensus on the main goals and purposes for early learning and child care requires broad stakeholder discussions to explore the ideas and aspirations of parents, families and communities as well as a consideration of the political and economic interests of government. Once agreed upon, goals and purposes can be subject to periodic review and discussion - with consideration also given as to how achievement of these goals can be measured or assessed.

Ideas for Consideration on the Vision and Goals for Early Learning and Child Care in Saskatchewan

Based on Saskatchewan's support of early learning and child care, and the collective values that inform much of the province's public policy, the vision and main goals for early learning and child care might focus on the following.

The Vision for Early Learning and Child Care

A Saskatchewan in which all children below the mandatory school age have access to high-quality early learning and child care that supports their development and meets their families' individual needs and circumstances.

The Goals for Early Learning and Child Care

To provide all children below the mandatory school age with access to the high-quality, affordable early learning and child care that supports their individual growth and development;

To provide all families with access to the high-quality early learning and child care that helps them to balance the demands of raising young children with those of work inside and outside of the family home;

To ensure that all communities have access to high quality early learning and child care that meets community needs, builds local community relationships, and brings families from different cultural and economic backgrounds together.

The Governance and Management of Early Learning and Child Care

The governance and management of early learning and child care shapes, amongst other things, where the responsibility for services lies, the degree and nature of public planning and how stakeholders, including parents and families, are engaged in services and delivery. The expansion and complexity of early learning and child care services makes their effective governance and management critical if they are to meet the various goals established for them and make the best use of public and private resources.

The OECD emphasizes the benefits of the active public planning and management of services, with governments setting clear guidelines on the level and nature of services available for families (OECD, 2004). System-wide planning forms a key feature of public management – one that helps to ensure that families have equitable access to high-quality, sustainable services (Mahon and Jensen, 2006; Prentice, 2007; OECD, 2012; Pascal et al, 2013).



The consolidation of responsibility for early learning and child care within a single ministry (usually Education) offers a starting point for more closely integrating service guidelines, regulation and financing (OECD, 2001, 2006), while the decentralization of service management to regional bodies helps ensure that services remain responsive to local needs and circumstances (Neuman, 2007; Prentice, 2007).

Across Canada, six provinces have consolidated the responsibility for early learning and child care in education ministries; although this has resulted in only limited efforts to more closely integrate services in terms of their design, regulation, funding and delivery. And while school divisions and some municipalities have assumed greater management and planning roles (Flanagan, 2010; Pascal, 2009; Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and Early Childhood Educators of BC, 2011), the bulk of services for younger children are still delivered through for-profit and non-profit organizations.

Provincial governments, in the main, focus their efforts on guiding or steering service delivery through regulatory and licensing regimes and financial mechanisms (such as limited operational funding, capital grants and fee subsidies) rather than active planning and development. They do not, in the main, establish larger system goals nor do they set benchmarks that address the quantity, quality, affordability and accessibility of services (OECD, 2012; Penn, 2012; White and Friendly, 2012).

As a final area for policy consideration, the OECD amongst others, highlights the importance of parents and families as ‘partners’ in early learning and child care (OECD, 2012; Moss, 2007). Parental and family engagement is considered important both in supporting positive outcomes for children and in ensuring that there are strong connections between services and the families and communities they serve. The engagement of parents and families is seen as increasingly important given the growing diversity of communities and the key roles of parents as their children’s first caregivers (UNESCO, 2006; OECD, 2012).

Ideas for Consideration on the Governance and Management of Early Learning and Child Care in Saskatchewan

The importance of strong public governance and management to the delivery of high-quality early learning and child care services is reflected in the following proposed policy directions.

Public Planning for Early Learning and Child Care through the Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education, which has responsibility for the early learning and child care service delivery (including licensed services and prekindergarten programs), would develop and oversee the implementation of a comprehensive provincial plan for the expansion and closer integration of services. This plan would include targets and timetables for the expansion and closer integration of services, on a regional basis, consistent with the goal of ensuring that all families have equitable access to high-quality services. Kindergarten services would be included in the provincial plan.

The Ministry of Education would assume an active planning role to ensure that the supply of services match the demand. Dedicated resources could be allocated to increase the level of service especially in those communities currently most underserved.

An enhanced regulatory framework would provide clear, research-based standards for the delivery of high-quality, affordable and accessible early learning and child care in a range of service environments. The regulatory framework would bring greater consistency across services relating to staffing, curriculum and assessment, accessibility and affordability.

The Decentralization of Service Management to the Regional Level

To ensure that early learning and child care services retain local or regional connections, the Ministry of Education would consult with early childhood stakeholders to determine the most appropriate regional bodies to manage services consistent with provincially established plans and guidelines.

The devolution of service management to a regional (or more local) level would aim to support the stronger management and oversight of services while increasing the responsiveness to regional needs. The range and complexity of early learning and child care services requires a balance between their centralized planning and decentralized management and support. Decentralization has the potential to support a closer integration of services at a local level as service providers work more closely together and in concert with other related supports and services. Clear overall guidelines are needed, however, to ensure that services retain a legitimate level of consistency.

Possible options for regional management bodies include the existing Regional Intersectoral Committees. These

regional bodies would be responsible to the Ministry of Education for the regional delivery of services, consistent with provincial guidelines and regulations, and would receive funding support based on regional service needs.

The Ministry of Education would work with the newly established regional bodies to determine the most appropriate ways in which parents and families can participate in the regional management of services. One possible option is the development of regional parent councils that could provide advice and input to both provincial and regional decisions.

Parents, families and communities would also benefit from additional information on the key developments in the science of the early years, as well as research on how services and programs can be delivered to best meet the needs of children and families. Positively engaging parents and families in early learning and child care involves a careful balancing of their individual interests as the clients of services with those of broader public interests.

Financing Early Learning and Child Care

Financing is one of the most important factors that shapes the provision of early learning and child care. It impacts on the nature and types of services, their quality, accessibility, affordability and sustainability. Research and practice show that two aspects of financing are important: first, the amount of public financing and second, how it is distributed or spent.

The levels of public investment in early learning and care have risen within OECD countries in recent years, a reflection both of government efforts to meet the rising demand for services and the recognition that early learning and care done well represents a sound public investment. While they have also increased in Canadian provinces, they still remain lower than those in other OECD nations with further significant variations between provinces (UNICEF, 2008; HRSDC; 2012, Friendly and Prentice, 2012). The investments Canadian provinces make in early learning and child care fall significantly short of internationally referenced guidelines such as UNICEF's benchmark for minimum public spending of one percent⁸ of GDP for 0-5 year-olds (UNICEF, 2008). Based on 2008 data, Saskatchewan investments in early childhood education and care comprise 0.18 percent of GDP (Muhajarine et al, 2012).

⁸ It should be noted that some countries—those at the top of UNICEF's rankings of ELCC policy and provision—spend more, several spend considerably more.



Research points to the benefits of supply-side funding (for service operational and capital costs) rather than demand-side funding (that provides monies directly to parents and families) in supporting high-quality services (Cleveland and Kashinsky, 2004; Penn, 2012; OECD, 2004). Supply-side funding enables governments to more efficiently allocate public funding to high-quality services. By contrast, demand-side funding strategies, although politically popular, provide governments with a limited ability to direct funds to specific goals or purposes. They are similarly less likely to support service infrastructure and may lead to higher service fees for parents (Penn, 2012).

Lower levels of public investment effectively shift the burden of service costs to parents and families. This makes regulated services unaffordable for many families and places pressure on service providers to reduce service costs which in turn can negatively impact service quality. The significant cost of high-quality early learning and child care requires an appropriate balance between public and private investments to ensure that services are accessible for all families. For many governments, however, additional public investments in new services present particular challenges as they address deficits, or calls for fiscal restraint and controls on public spending (OECD, 2001).

A number of studies highlight the economic benefits of investments in early learning and child care for vulnerable children (Heckman, 2008). They further show local economic returns from public investments (Prentice and McCracken, 2004), broader economic multipliers and spin-offs (Fairholm, 2009) as well as increased tax revenues from the greater labour force participation of mothers with young children (Fortin, 2012). Taken together, these studies show how investing in early learning and child care makes economic sense.

Ideas for Consideration for the Financing of Early Learning and Child Care in Saskatchewan

The province's strong economic position and its recent rapid demographic growth provide two drivers for new investments in early learning and child care. The following ideas are proposed to guide these new investments.

A Provincial Strategy For Increased Public Investments in Early Learning and Child Care

The province would develop a long-term strategy to increase the level of public investment in early learning and child care. This strategy would establish clear, long-term financial goals and objectives, as well as accompanying strategies and timelines for meeting them.

The proposed strategies would set out to achieve the following goals:

- To ensure that all families have access to an appropriate level of regulated services that are affordable, accessible and of a high quality; and
- To ensure that early learning and child care staff receive an appropriate level of remuneration and benefits that matches their educational levels and training as well as the demands of the work.

The Enrichment of Existing Financing with an Emphasis on Supply-Side Funding

Building on the foundations already in place, the provincial funding strategy would extend and enrich existing supply-side funding models so that, over time, public support for early learning and child care becomes more similar to that provided for public education for older children. Services would be substantively financed through operational funding for regulated service providers based on the number of children served. Service providers who serve high-needs or vulnerable populations would receive additional funding.

Ensuring that Services are Affordable for all Families

The provincial investment strategy would also include specific initiatives to ensure that services are affordable for all children and families and that service providers are not left with the challenge of covering fees in those instances where families cannot afford the cost of service. Possible options for consideration include maximum fee schedules for services in the different regions of the province as well as appropriate fee subsidies for low-income families which

cover the full costs of service. The goal would be one of ensuring that the cost of service is neither a barrier for family access, nor a liability for service providers trying to collect family fees.

The Organization and Delivery of Early Learning and Child Care Services

The organization of early learning and child care services forms an important feature of service landscapes. There are variations in how Canadian provinces organize services as well as significant differences in services for older pre-school children (such as kindergarten and prekindergarten) and younger children (such as centre-based child care and family day homes) (HRSDC, 2012; Friendly, Halfon, Beach and Forer, 2013).

Kindergarten is publicly funded in all the provinces with six supporting a full-day program. The majority of services are provided through the school system. Prekindergarten is also provided through the school system, with most provinces targeting services to specific groups of young children. Ontario is the only province to offer services for all four-year-olds.

Child care, family day home and preschool services for younger children are mainly delivered through non-profit organizations or private businesses which operate as stand-alone services – with some larger service chains. There are often few links between local providers and limited connections to other programs and services that support children and their families.

How best to reorganize these services as part of a more integrated, and comprehensive approach to early learning and child care is complex. The differences in service landscapes suggests the need for various options, while recognizing that integrating services contributes to better outcomes for children and their families (Flanagan, 2010; Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and Early Childhood Educators of BC, 2011).

Key areas for discussion include the benefits (and challenges) of school divisions assuming broader service roles and responsibilities as well as the ways in which they can work more closely with other local service providers. Municipalities have also taken on a greater service delivery role in some provinces (Muttart Foundation, 2011), while in Ontario, they are mandated to manage local services, a unique feature among the provinces.

The role of for-profit businesses in service delivery also remains an important topic for discussion. In most provinces, private businesses play some role in service delivery and are eligible for provincial funding support. While most are small, community-based businesses there has been a recent increase in larger chain-based, for-profit service providers.

Numerous studies raise concerns about for-profit models of service delivery. They report research findings which show that for-profit services provide, on average, a lower quality of service than public or non-profit ones (Penn, 2012). They further argue that market models make it more difficult to provide families with equitable access to high-



quality, affordable services (White and Friendly, 2012). Saskatchewan and Manitoba have both shown strong commitments to the delivery of services through non-profit organizations.

Ideas for Consideration for the Organization of Early Learning and Child Care Services in Saskatchewan

The province's recent increased investments in early learning and child care services might be supported through further strategies to better connect and integrate services at a regional or local level. The following ideas are presented for consideration.

New Partnerships with School Divisions and Municipalities to Expand Early Learning and Child Care Services

To expand and better connect early learning and child care services, the Ministry of Education might enter into new partnerships with local school divisions or municipalities to manage and deliver early learning and child care services in accordance with provincial guidelines. These new partnerships might build on the work underway to deliver prekindergarten services for vulnerable children through local school divisions.



As part of these new partnerships, the Ministry of Education could provide school divisions or municipalities with capital support to develop new spaces for children below the mandatory school age and operational grant support to sustain their operation.

The Development of Local Early Learning and Child Care Networks

To increase the connections between local services, the Ministry of Education might explore options to create and support local early learning and child care networks. These networks could include a range of service providers (e.g. child care centres, family day homes, preschools and prekindergarten) all of which agree to share resources, to link their respective programs, and to develop complementary approaches to early learning and child care. The Ministry of Education would provide funding to support the formation and operation of these local service networks based on agreed service guidelines and outcomes.

New Supports for Multi-site, Multi-service Organizations

To better connect local services, the Ministry of Education might also consider new funding guidelines to support the development and operation of multi-site, multi-service organizations. These organizations would expand their existing services to provide families with a range of early learning and child care options (including full-day and part-day centre-based child care, family day home and afterschool services) that support a continuity of early learning and child care. These organizations would be eligible for capital and operational support to both expand and connect their services under one organizational infrastructure.

The Regulation of Part-time Preschool Services

To expand the range of regulated early learning service options available for families, the Ministry of Education could introduce guidelines to formally regulate part-time preschool services. These regulations, consistent with those in place in other provinces, would establish clear parameters for the operation and delivery of services for children below the mandatory school age.

The Provision of High-Quality Early Learning and Child Care Services

The benefits of early learning and child care depend on the quality of the services provided. High-quality early learning and care is of benefit to children and their families,

while poor-quality care provides little benefit and may even contribute to negative outcomes for the most vulnerable children (Penn, 2009).

The different aspects of services that contribute to their quality are multiple and interrelated. Research findings highlight the importance of staff-child ratios, the training and education of staff, and the design of early learning and care programs as amongst the most important features in influencing quality both across program settings and in different service models (UNESCO, 2006; OECD, 2012). The research also emphasizes the importance of monitoring and assessing program quality on a regular basis, with the results used both to guide individual programs and to provide information on the operation of service systems (OECD, 2012).

The Education, Training and Support of Early Childhood Educators

The education, training and support of staff are strong contributors to the quality of early learning and child care. The early childhood educator's ability to develop strong relationships with children and provide a 'secure, consistent, sensitive, stimulating and rewarding environment' (Government of British Columbia, 2008: 23) is critical to effective practice.

Well-educated, experienced and competent early childhood educators provide the foundation for high-quality programs and services. These staff have specialized post-secondary training in early childhood education, and draw on appropriate resources to support children's active learning in ways that are caring and nurturing (UNICEF, 2008).

The formal preparation for early childhood educators in Canada remains limited – with only a minority staff having specialized post-secondary education. This is especially the case for staff who work with the youngest children (three years of age and under). The low rates of remuneration for early childhood educators in child care settings further make it difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff. As a result, there is often a gap between what it is anticipated staff can support in terms of children's learning and growth and the knowledge, skills and experiences they bring to the practice. Simply, it takes a higher level of professional education and preparation to mobilize children's active learning than to provide good custodial care (Friendly, Doherty and Beach, 2006).

The assignment of certificated teachers, with no formal educational preparation in early learning and child care, to work with children below the mandatory school age is a further challenge raised in the research literature. The

OECD, amongst others, considers this problematic and cautions against it (OECD, 2012).

The Program and Pedagogical Approach to Early Learning and Child Care

The recognition of early learning and child care as a distinct field of education has resulted in a variety of curricular initiatives for young children (Bennett, 2004). This work draws on understandings of how very young children learn, the complementary nature of learning and care, and the commitment to move beyond the provision of custodial care.

The development of early learning curriculum frameworks resists the 'pushing down' of school-based practices into early learning environments and highlights the unique nature of learning in the early years. The Ministry of Family and Children in Quebec was the first to develop an early learning and care framework in 1997 – and since that time the majority of the provinces have addressed, in some form, the program content and approaches using in early learning and care programs. Saskatchewan, for example, introduced its '*Play and Exploration*' program guide in 2008.

These newer pedagogical approaches emphasize the role of children as active learners who create their own knowledge and understandings. They place an emphasis on play, the environment as a third teacher, and the quality of the interactions and relationships between educators and children, as well as children and their peers (Langford, 2010). They also take into account the diversity of children and their families and in the most recent cases (BC, PEI, NB and AB) are grounded in a child rights perspective.

The implementation of these curricula or guides is often challenging given their 'newness' and their focus on richer interactions between staff and children. Provinces have been required to allocate dedicated resources both to introduce them and to raise the competencies of staff to work with them. There further remains the question of how early childhood education and care curricula link with and inform often more well-established provincial kindergarten curricula.

Data Collection and Evaluation - Assessing and Reporting on Program and Service Outcomes

The collection and reporting of system-wide data and the monitoring of service quality and outcomes are also critical to ensuring service quality. The importance of this work to help plan, develop and evaluate early learning and child care services is widely referenced (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2012). A 2003 report commissioned by the

federal government identifies the need for a range of basic, demographic and contextual data, as well as a program of policy and program evaluation and research in a variety of fields (Cleveland, Colley, Friendly and Lero, 2003). Well-supported and appropriately designed systems of data collection and reporting can provide information on the most effective uses of public funding, provide measures of the progress toward goals, and support related research (OECD, 2012).

At present, the collection and reporting of system-wide data, as well as data at the program level, is largely absent across Canada. As a result, it remains difficult both to assess the overall quality of services, and to determine their impact on child development and family well-being.

Ideas for Consideration for the Provision of High Quality Early Learning and Child Care in Saskatchewan

The province's recent investments to increase the number of early learning and child care spaces might be supported through the following strategies to ensure the quality of services provided.

Increased Education, Professional Development and Remuneration for Early Childhood Educators

Early childhood educators require an appropriate level of formal educational preparation supported through ongoing professional development. In Saskatchewan, as in the rest of Canada, the formal educational requirements for early childhood educators who work outside of the school system are modest and their access to professional development opportunities is limited. To address these challenges, the Ministry of Education could move, over an agreed time-frame, to increase the formal educational requirements for staff in regulated early learning and child care settings. These new education requirements would be supported through additional requirements for ongoing professional development.

Significant increases in the educational requirements for early childhood educators will need to be introduced over time, supported by increased rates of remuneration, and include some provision for current staff to have opportunities to upgrade their educational levels while working. Certificated teaching staff working in prekindergarten and kindergarten programs would also be required to complete specific educational training and/or professional development in early childhood education.



The Further Development and Implementation of the Saskatchewan Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide

The *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* forms an important resource to guide practice in early learning and child care settings. The Ministry of Education could update and further develop this resource drawing on the advancing body of research on early learning and child care curricula. This research highlights the value of curriculum frameworks that reflect broad goals for early learning and care, that are developed through stakeholder consultation, and that guide practice in broad terms.

The Development and Implementation of a Provincial Data Collection and Monitoring Strategy

To improve service quality and policy development, the Ministry of Education would develop and implement a comprehensive provincial data collection and monitoring strategy for early learning and child care. The new strategy would build on and extend the existing system-wide data collected for kindergarten and prekindergarten to all regulated early learning and child care services.

The collection of system data would provide key information on service levels, the allocation and use of funds, the main service features and broad outcomes for children and families. These data could be gathered and reported at a variety of levels and in a range of different forms to support decision-making at a policy level, to improve service practice and outcomes and to provide better public reporting on early learning and child care.

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Appendix – Data Tables

Table 1. Median hourly wages (gross) in child care centres for 0-6 years – prov//terr- 2012

P/T	Median hourly wage - \$\$
NS	12.84
NB	13.50
NL	14.00
SK	14.92
PE	15.00
AB	15.33
MB	16.00
CANADA	16.50
BC	17.00
ON	17.29
QC	19.13

Source: Flanagan, Beach and Varmuza. (2013: pg. 17).

Table 2. Reported parent fees in centres for ages 0-5 years SK, MB and Canada-wide median fees, 2012

	Infant space - \$	Toddler space - \$	Preschool space - \$
SK – median	650	561	535
MB – median	631	431	431
CANADA – median	761	701	674
CANADA – range	152-1152	152 – 925	152-835

Source: Flanagan, Beach and Vermuza (2012: pg. 15).

Table 3. Subsidy eligibility (gross unadjusted annual income, one child), # children subsidized 1992-2010

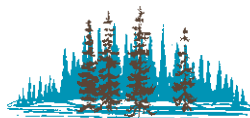
Year	Income up to which a family is eligible for a full subsidy (\$) (Turning point)	Income at which all subsidy eligibility ceases (\$) (Break even point)	# children subsidized
1992	19,668	30,948	3,662
1995	19,668	31,920	3,683
1998	19,668	31,920	3,634
2001	19,668	31,920	3,684
2004	19,800	36,720	3,716
2006	19,800	36,720	3,672
2008	19,800	36,720	3,718
2010	19,800	36,720	3,159

Source: HRSDC, 2010; Childcare Resource and Research Unit 1993, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2008.

Table 4. Child care spending by type 1992 - 2010

Year	Subsidies (\$)	Recurring (\$)	Capital/equipment/other (\$)	Total (\$)
1992	10,555,000	1,587,300	164,400	12,306,700
1995	9,672,820	2,787,263	253,827	12,713,910
1998	9,900,959	3,422,625	1,127,989	14,541,573
2001	9,850,392	5,645,696	412,349	15,908,977
2004	10,505,000	8,607,100	526,900	16,639,000
2006	11,605,000	10,580,200	588,000	22,773,200
2008	15,986,400	21,089,716	8,628,187	45,704,305
2010	14,727,000	20,867,804	7,423,727	53,018,531
% increase 1992-2010	39%	1845%	4415%	331%

Source: HRSDC, 2010; Childcare Resource and Research Unit 1993, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2008.



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