

ONTARIO EARLY YEARS CENTRES IMPLEMENTATION REVIEW MINISTRY OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH SERVICES

November 2004



Submitted to: Early Years Programs Branch
Policy Development and Program Design Division



Submitted by:

HCA

HARRY CUMMINGS AND ASSOCIATES INC.

96 Kathleen Street, Guelph, ON N1H 4Y3

phone: (519) 823-1647 fax: (519) 821-0202

website: www.hcaconsulting.ca email: hca@web.ca

Executive Summary

The Ontario Government, recognizing the importance of the early years in child development, commissioned *The Early Years Study* in 1998 “to provide options and recommendations with respect to the best ways of preparing all of Ontario’s young children – including those at risk or with special needs – for scholastic, career and social success...”. The *Early Years Study* made 11 recommendations. In response to these, the Ontario Early Years Plan was announced in 2001. The establishment of a network of Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYCs) was one of two key initiatives set out in the Plan.

The Government implemented the OEYCs network in two phases. Phase One planning started in 2001 and resulted in the opening of 42 Centres in 2002. Phase Two planning began in 2002 and resulted in the opening of an additional 61 Centres by the fall of 2003. Each Centre provides children 0-6 and parents and caregivers access to early learning and parenting programs, services and supports, and is designed to be a single point of access to a wide range of early years programs and services. Many Centres were established at the sites of existing service provider agencies. Most Centres have developed satellite locations and outreach programs, some involving mobile facilities, to extend services to all parts of their service areas.

Each Centre is responsible for providing the following core services: early learning services (play-based, problem-solving); parent/caregiver education (including pre-natal/post-natal resources and healthy child development); information on local community services; early literacy; outreach services; volunteer recruitment/coordination; program effectiveness/child outcomes measurement; speakers’ bureau; and linkages to the community and local service providers. Each Centre is also expected to develop and establish tailored programs and services that have been identified through local planning processes.

In the spring of 2004, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services determined that it would be timely to review the implementation of the Ontario Early Years Centres Program to examine the Centres’ delivery of core and other services and their impact on the community.

The consulting firm of Harry Cummings and Associates (HCA) was engaged in July 2004 to undertake the review. The firm focused on three key issues: **program effectiveness** – the extent to which the program produced its expected results and thereby achieved its objectives and contributed to its goal; **program efficiency** – the extent to which program inputs were supplied and managed and activities organized in the most appropriate manner at the least cost; and **program equity** - the degree to which the program provided benefits to and fostered the involvement of all participants equally. This document represents the findings and conclusions which resulted from the work undertaken by HCA.

The methodology used was basically that set out by the Ministry in its request for resources. It encompassed a review of documents followed by a three part approach. Part one involved the distribution of an e-mail questionnaire to each of the 103 Ontario Early Years Centres to collect profile data. Part two involved making a two day site visit to each of 18 randomly selected OEYC sites (two per Ministry region). During the site visits, programming was observed; interviews were conducted with the Executive Directors/Program Managers (18) and available professional staff (110); surveys were distributed to parents and caregivers using the facilities (184); pre-focus group surveys were distributed to invited parents and caregivers (198) and parent and caregiver focus groups held (18). Part three involved reaching out to stakeholders who could not be readily reached during the site visits. Telephone surveys, and in some cases e-mail surveys, were used to gain input from the Community Champions and a sample of Planning Table and Advisory Board members from each of the 18 sites. An e-mail survey was used to obtain the views of the Program Supervisors responsible for the program in the Ministry's nine regional offices. The evaluation framework, questionnaires used and other relevant documents are included in the report's appendices.

While the methodology used produced a highly informative picture of the three key issues being examined, several limitations should be noted. The methodology does not produce data which can be ascribed a specific level of statistical certainty. The lack of data for the fourth quarter of 2003-04 made it difficult to get completely up-to-date measures of OEYC usage. The tight timelines placed on the review reduced the amount of questionnaire pre-testing which would normally be done. The need to rely on Executive Directors to make arrangements for the parent/caregiver focus groups at each site and to provide advice on the most workable agenda for each site visit meant that the programming observed and the parents and caregivers involved were not chosen strictly at random. The OEYC site visits were undertaken during the later part of August and early September, a period during which some Centres were not conducting the same level or breadth of programming that they would be conducting during much of the year.

The more significant findings/conclusions of the review are:

General:

The following general findings and conclusions emerge from the work undertaken:

- those Centres which have been in operation longest, or were built on existing early years operations, tend to be more advanced in providing the full suite of core services and in achieving a workable balance in the programs and services they provide;
- many Phase Two Centres are still in the developmental phase and are working through the needs of their clients and striving to come up with the right mix of programs to meet those needs;

- the challenges facing sparsely populated northern and rural ridings are very different from those facing densely populated southern ridings – flexibility is needed to enable Centres to meet the unique needs of their service areas; and
- the recent establishment of a provincial OEYC network will provide a valuable forum to address common issues and to share best practices.

Program Effectiveness:

An analysis of stakeholders' responses and ministry data related to the program's 14 objectives and associated matters generated the following findings/conclusions:

General Effectiveness:

- The programs/services mentioned most frequently as being “particularly effective” by the Executive Directors, OEYC Professional Staff, Program Supervisors and Advisory Board Members surveyed, were: parent/caregiver workshops/seminars (45), drop-ins (35), literacy related programs/services (30), outreach programs (18) and child health related programs /services (15). Reasons given most frequently for the effectiveness of these and other programs/activities/ services include dedicated OEYC staff (33), partnerships with other services (22), the Centre's environment (20) and the focus on responding to the unique needs of each service area (18).
- The programs/services mentioned most frequently by the four groups as being “least effective” were: speakers' bureau (18), not enough parent/caregiver education programming to meet demand (13), volunteer recruitment (7) and evening programs (7).

Increasing Access by all Children to Environments and Services that Promote Healthy Child Development Including Quality Literacy Programming:

- The estimated number of children served by, and number of child visits to, Phase One Centres increased by 50.6% and 34.8% respectively between 2002-03 and 2003-04 suggesting that the OEYCs program is enabling more and more children to access environments and services that promote healthy child development.
- Parents and caregivers who participated in the focus groups reported observing a broad range of positive changes in their children as a result of their involvement in OEYC programs. Among these changes are: increased confidence, self-esteem and independence; improved school readiness; improved social skills; improved ability to share; new friendships; greater level of happiness; less separation anxiety; improved ability to deal with structure and routines; accelerated learning from exposure to new people and resources; greater empathy for, and ability to interact with, other children; increased willingness to try new things including new and healthy foods; improved math skills; improved hygiene and willingness to tidy up; increased awareness of other languages and cultures; increased speech, language and communication skills; improved ability to focus, concentrate and take

instruction; increased respect for other people and other people's belongings; increased patience; improved art, music and dance skills; improved tactile development; changed introverts into extroverts; improved health as a result of fluoride clinic, parent nutrition program, access to Public Health nurse, etc.; increased ability to cope with changes/adjustments; and increased self-discipline.

Increasing Parent/Caregiver Knowledge and Improving Practice in Key Areas:

- The estimated number of parents/caregivers served by, and the number of parent/caregiver visits to, Phase One Centres increased by 28.1% and 30.4% respectively between 2002-03 and 2003-04 suggesting that the OEYC program is enabling more and more parents/caregivers to gain access to OEYC programming.
- Parents and caregivers involved in the focus groups reported experiencing a wide variety of personal benefits from their involvement in OEYC programs.
- Parents and caregivers surveyed rated the usefulness of what they learned from their participation in OEYC programs and services at an average score of 4.58 (mode 5) on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being 'of little use' and 5 being 'extremely useful'. Similarly, they rated the degree of change (if any) they had made to their parenting/caregiving as a result of their participation at an average score of 3.67 (mode 4) on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being 'no change' and 5 being "major positive change".

Improving Maternal Health and Child Health and Well Being

- Parents and caregivers surveyed rated the degree of change (if any) they had experienced in their personal health and wellbeing and in the personal health and wellbeing of their child(ren) as a result of being involved in OEYC programs at an average score of 3.61 (mode 4) and 4.12 (mode 5) respectively on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "no change" and 5 being "major positive change".

Developing/Improving Social Networks Among Parents/Caregivers

- Over 89% of parents and caregivers surveyed made new friends through one or more OEYC programs and of those that made new friends, 14.1% met with said friends daily, 56.5% weekly, 18.6% monthly and 10.8% less frequently than monthly.

Increasing Parental Volunteer Participation in Early Years Activities

- Just under 24% of parents and caregivers surveyed volunteered in a program or service for children 0-6 as a result of their participation in an OEYC program or service. Of those that volunteered, 15.6% gave over 4 hours per week, 23.3% between 2 and 4 hours, 18.9% between 1 and 1.9 hours and 42.2% less than 1 hour.

Increasing Knowledge in the Service Provider Community of Early Years Services, Supports and Gaps

- Thirty six percent of parents and caregivers surveyed indicated that they had participated in one or more programs or services provided by another agency as a result of their participation in an OEYC program or service. The most common types programs or services used are: Health Unit & Related Programs (Healthy Babies Healthy Children, Breast Feeding, Pre-Natal Classes, etc), Specific Local Children's Programs & Events, Workshops/Courses, Playgroups, and Speech Therapy. A number of these programs/services were offered on-site at the local OEYC.
- Parents and caregivers who used the programs or services provided by another agency rated the usefulness of such programs or services at an average score of 4.73 (mode 5) on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being of 'little use' and 5 being 'extremely useful'.
- Advisory Board Members surveyed rated the effectiveness of their local OEYC in increasing their knowledge of 1) early years services and supports and of 2) gaps in early years services at average scores of 3.31 (mode 4) and 3.46 (mode 4) respectively on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'no effect' and 5 being 'major effect'

Increasing Collaboration Among Service Providers

- Advisory Board Members surveyed rated the effectiveness of their local OEYC in increasing 1) collaboration among children's service providers and 2) the quality of local literacy programs at average scores of 3.76 (mode 5) and 3.83 (mode 3 and 5) respectively on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'no effect' and 5 being 'major effect'.
- Executive Directors and OEYC Professional Staff surveyed mentioned the following services most frequently when asked to indicate which outside services they made the most referrals to: Health Services (82), Speech and Language (48), Child Care Services (41) and Family Counseling/Support Programs (22).
- Approximately 71% of OEYC's have representatives who participate in Healthy Babies Healthy Children Advisory Committees.
- It is not uncommon for OEYCs to be represented on five or more planning/coordinating groups.

Training of Service Providers

- Service providers and other adults involved with OEYCs see merit in the training opportunities offered by the Centres and pursue training when it meets their specific needs.

Increasing Community Awareness of the Importance of Early Years and Healthy Child Development

- All OEYCs are active in increasing community awareness of the importance of early years and healthy child development.

- The marketing/promotional strategies mentioned most frequently as being effective by the Executive Directors, OEYC Professional Staff and Advisory Board Members surveyed were: Word of Mouth (72), Child Focused Community Events (34), Local Press (30), Referrals from Other Agencies (23), Radio (16), Monthly OEYC Calendars (16) and Flyers (15).

Increasing Awareness of Services, Including Ontario Early Years Centres, in the Community

- As most Centres are experiencing growth in the number of families using their facilities, in the number of visits made, in the number of referrals occurring and in the number of requests for information, they are of the opinion that they are increasing awareness of early year's services in their community and their Centre.

Increasing Community, Volunteer and Business Participation in Early Years Activities

- Advisory Board Members surveyed rated the effectiveness of their local OEYC in increasing community and volunteer participation in early years activities at an average score of 4.0 (mode 4) on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'no effect' and 5 being 'major effect'.
- The initiatives mentioned most frequently by Executive Directors, OEYC Professional Staff and Advisory Board Members surveyed are: involving high school students (35), participating in special events and community events (32), involving college students (17) and encouraging parents/caregivers already in programs to volunteer (15).

Increasing Family-Friendly Work Place Practices Within the Community

- OEYCs are making a concerted effort to run their operations in a family-friendly manner and to model desired practices for the community. Few if any, however, are actively promoting family-friendly work places within their service areas.

Recording, Tracking and Reporting Data on OEYC Programs and Outcomes

- Each OEYC is gathering program related data/information daily and reporting on it monthly, quarterly and annually.
- The types of data/information mentioned most frequently as being important by Executive Directors and OEYC Professional Staff surveyed are: number of visits by parents (53), number of visits by children (50), number in attendance at individual programs, workshops, etc. (39) and participant feedback/satisfaction surveys (29).

Increasing Capacity to Assess Effectiveness of Early Years Programming

- Data/information being collected is being used to manage individual OEYC operations but is not being used to any significant degree to assess program effectiveness.

- A coordinated effort, involving all the key stakeholders, is needed if changes are to be made and an appropriate system of effectiveness measurement put in place.

Program Efficiency:

Duplication of Effort, Funding and Administrative Process

- Many of the Centres have been able to avoid or reduce duplication of services as a result of their integration with other service providers.
- OEYCs would like to see a more integrated and standardized approach to data collection and reporting that will satisfy the interests/needs of all funders.

Current Program Model

- OEYCs would like the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to provide more consistent interpretations on policy and core funded services.
- OEYCs view core funding as essential but report that the level of funding is inadequate. Improvements to the funding model are needed to ensure that the allocation of funding is adequate to address the unique service requirements and service delivery challenges faced by different regions.
- OEYCs would like greater flexibility in determining the operating hours of their main centres and which core services to focus on.
- Most of the 18 OEYCs visited have strong supportive relationships with their Regional Program Supervisors.

Development of the Community Plan

- Almost all Community Champions and Planning Table Members surveyed indicated the process used to develop the community plan was good or excellent.
- Most of the OEYC Executive Directors, Supervisors and Community Champion/Planning Table Members interviewed found the development of the three-year plan to be a useful exercise.
- The planning process could be improved by providing more time, by sharing information on best practices, by minimizing duplication of data, by providing timely feedback and requiring the Board of Directors to sign-off.
- The political nature of the process which defined Centre catchment areas by political ridings was seen as problematic. Representatives felt that an opportunity was missed to enhance the integration of different service sectors through the use of existing and established catchment areas for education and health.

Plan Implementation

- Based on discussions with OEYC Executive Directors, Phase One OEYCs have implemented all or most of their Community Plan strategies and activities. In general, Phase Two OEYCs are continuing to work toward full implementation of their strategies and activities.

- During their initial year of operation OEYCs tend to focus on implementing early learning activities, parent/caregiver education activities and outreach services. One of the major implementation challenges is the provision of services and programs to all parts of the catchment area within the first year.
- A common theme across Phase One and Phase Two OEYCs is the limited development of the volunteer initiative and the speakers' bureau.

Organizational Structure of the OEYC

- In many cases where the OEYC is hosted by an established organization (e.g. Family Resource Centre), the implementation of OEYC strategies and activities has been enhanced through pre-established programs and the use of existing networks and partnerships with other service providers and organizations.
- Ninety one percent of Centres (based on a random sample of 45 OEYCs) have a volunteer Board of Directors or other advisory committee. Over 87% of OEYCs have parents or other program users on their board/committee; approximately 90% have business sector representatives; and close to 88% have health or social service sector representatives.
- A decision is needed with respect to which Ministry, Children and Youth Services or Education, takes the lead in promoting early literacy.
- OEYCs would like to be more engaged in Ministry decisions related to data collection and defining the data elements.
- Many OEYCs have worked through the process of determining the right balance of full-time and part-time employees but some OEYCs are still exploring different work arrangements to provide the consistency and continuity that staff and families desire.

Relative Importance of Core Services

- Early learning activities and parent/caregiver education services were commonly identified by Directors, Regional Supervisors, Advisory Board Members, and Community Champion/Planning Table members as the top two core services that are most needed. Volunteer recruitment/coordination and the Speakers' Bureau were commonly identified as less important than the other core services.
- OEYCs would like greater flexibility in determining which core services to focus on. With current levels of funding and demand for programs and services, OEYCs are sometimes unable to offer similar programs/services in all locations.

OEYC Policy and Funding

- OEYCs rely on the Ministry for the majority of their funding (96% on average).
- Ninety three percent of OEYCs receive a wide variety of non cash/in-kind donations from organizations and/or businesses including toys, meeting space, refreshments, professional services, office supplies and the use of office equipment.

- OEYCs also provide a wide variety of non cash/in-kind contributions to other organizations including use of meeting space, use of office equipment and staffing.
- Directors expressed concern that current funding mechanisms do not reflect the unique service requirements and service delivery challenges faced by different regions and that moderate funding increases are needed if quality staff are to be retained.
- The lack of clarity with respect to the use of user fees is an issue. If user fees cannot be charged for certain services, there is concern that the cost of replacing stolen and damaged resources, such as toys and books, will put further stress on already stretched budgets.
- The catchment areas for many OEYCs are not consistent with the catchment areas of established organizations such as Health Units leading to increased administration burden and an inability to fully utilize socio-economic data utilized by others.
- A number of Directors and Program Supervisors indicated that the Data Analysis Coordinator position needed to be made more functional and to be provided with a clear job description.

OEYC Program and Service Delivery

- Sixteen of the 18 OEYCs visited are open 52 weeks per year; the other two close between Christmas and New Years.
- The average number of locations where Centres were planning to offer programs in September 2004 was 13 (range 4 – 43).
- Some OEYCs reduce the number and types of programs offered during the summer months in keeping with fewer participants during these months.
- While many OEYCs are providing information in the languages most common to their community, Centres reported an interest in enhancing their capacity to reach other language groups.

Compliance with Ministry Policies and Procedures

- OEYCs are in compliance with most the policies and procedures set out in section 6 of the Ministry's "Business Practices Guideline" however, 39% of the 18 Centres visited reported that they neither had regular fire drills nor written fire evacuation procedures posted in conspicuous places for parents/caregivers.

Program Equity:

Initiatives to Ensure Universal Accessibility

- OEYC staff have created and effectively executed multiple initiatives to facilitate universal accessibility and as a result are reaching a wide variety of parents/caregivers and children.
- Outreach services are a particularly important initiative in the effort to ensure that all families within a service area have an opportunity to benefit from OEYC programs and services.

- The satisfaction of basic needs such as the need for food, clothing, and shelter pose both a challenge and an opportunity for Centres in their efforts to include at risk families in their programming.

Changes Needed to Foster Accessibility

- Parents and caregivers surveyed rated the ease of accessing local OEYC programs and services at an average score of 4.60 (mode 5) on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'very difficult' and 5 being 'very easy'.
- Of the parents/caregivers surveyed, 64.9% indicated that they had encountered 'no problems' in accessing the OEYC programs or services.
- Efforts should continue to identify program times that meet the needs of most clients and to provide child care in circumstances where it is a barrier to participation.

Characteristics of Program Participants

- Of the parents/caregivers surveyed, 76.9% were parents; their average age was 35 years; 88.8% were female; 81.8% had one or two children and 52.7% had completed a post-secondary trades certificate, college diploma or university degree.

Special Needs Children

- Parent focus group responses indicate that OEYC staff have been helpful in identifying potential special needs in children, in providing informal support and in arranging referrals to professionals who can provide further information and expertise.

Equity Among Service Providers

- Inequities in wages, benefits, involvement in decision making etc. exist between Centres and their satellites and between different Centres.