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EDMONTON SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL



TASK FORCE ON:

THE OPERATIONAL PLANS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

The Task Force on Early Childhood Services is composed of parents, teachers, and community workers concerned with the contradictions in the Operational Plans for Early Childhood Services. The contradictions exist between basic beliefs (or philosophy) and the implementation policies.

We have found the plans heavily biased towards professional educators and the traditional public/separate school board approach, detrimental in labelling children by the creation of educational ghettos (the disadvantaged areas), a plan which defiantly discourages parental involvement in the early years of their children and an extension of the primary grades to the younger years.

Though the philosophy of Early Childhood Services states the contrary, the present operational plans can only implement the described results. The purpose of this brief is to discuss these contradictions with the hope that the Department of Education will seek solutions to these problems.

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The Alberta Government has published Operational Plans for Early Childhood Services. The pamphlet discusses the Early Childhood Services which will be offered as a separate branch of the Department of Education in conjunction with the Departments of Health and Social Development; Culture, Youth and Recreation; Advanced Education and Education. The Edmonton Social Planning Council Task Force on Early Childhood Services finds many contradictions between the philosophy and its methods of implementation.

The pamphlet outlines "basic beliefs" for the Early Childhood Service programs. Since the Task Force is in basic agreement with the "beliefs", we would like to discuss the contradictions in the implementation plans with the hope that the involved Departments will carefully consider our criticisms and recommendations.

Belief 1:

Early Childhood Education is an important part, but only one part of a comprehensive system of Early Childhood Services.

When one looks at the administrative and advisory structure for Early Childhood Services, one finds that it is heavily laden with professional educators. On the advisory level: those who are to develop general policies and mission level co-ordination of Early Childhood Services: 2 out of 4 Deputy Ministers are with the Department of Education. Of those who are to develop specific guidelines and policies (the Early Childhood Services Co-ordinating Council) there are 11 professional educators (including the ministerial appointments), and 5 people from non-educational areas. On the administrative side, it is not until one gets to the Proposal Review Committee, which reviews proposals based on the guidelines established by the Co-ordination Committee, that we see non-professional educators and even then it is 3 out of 5. It is only on the local level that we see the introduction of medical officers, nurses, dental officers, preventative social service consultants, parent or volunteer consultants; those who will contribute to a comprehensive service.

The Worth Commission Report is cited as a major contributor for the Early Childhood Services philosophy and plans, yet the Worth Report stated "At the regional or local level, decisions regarding finance, priorities and other broad policy matters should be taken by the school board, community organization or other agency offering the Early Childhood Program" (p. 123) and that the Department of Education "actively seek continuing dialogue with the public-at-large and with stakeholder groups such as... Unifarm, Metis Association of Alberta and Students organizations".

Since the structure of the Early Childhood Services program is so heavily oriented towards the Departments of Education and since the Department of Education has not sought non-professional educator groups on the local level to develop priorities and policies, nor actively sought dialogue with the public at large, one can only assume that the methods of implementing the program, are not in line with the attempts to have education by only one part of the Early Childhood Services.

Belief 2:

Provincial and local organizations through which Early Childhood Services are provided must encourage and maximize the involvement of parents and the community. Early Childhood Services must include the provision of such educational, nutritional, social and health services that will help young children.

The major thrust of the Early Childhood Services program is "strengthening the role of the family as a first and fundamental influence on child development" (p. 2) but the proposed policies discourage it. If parent involvement was sought, parents would have been included in the planning of the Early Childhood Services policy, especially those involved in already existing pre-school programs. This was not done.

At present there is no group to represent parents on the Early Childhood Services Co-ordinating Council (the Alberta Federation of Home and School does not represent the parents of pre-schoolers, and thus cannot be counted). If Early Childhood Services is to encourage parent involvement, then why is there no representation on the Co-ordinating Council? The bias towards the "Education" Department will have an adverse effect on parent involvement, since the traditional educational system encourages parents to give up their children to "professional" educators. Many existing independent pre-school programs encourage parents to place a high value on what they themselves can give to their children in the programs and this is not provided for in the traditional system. The Local Advisory Committee is cited as the way in which parents can become involved, but this involvement is limited to the power of planning and operating programs after the guidelines and policies have already been laid down.

Another aspect of minimizing the involvement of parents lies in the inequity of funding. While in theory the "area of parent involvement and adult education emerges as extremely important when considering the quality of the services to be provided" those parents already involved in operating a pre-school program for their children will be penalized for this involvement, by getting \$80.00 per child (normal) per year less than the Public/Separate School Boards. (To say that non-public or non-separate schools are private and therefore do not warrant equal public funding, is to basically ignore the concept of community or parent co-operative schools which operate on very limited budgets.) For those parents in the "disadvantaged" areas, the penalization is even greater. The difference between public/separate schools and community or parent co-operative schools is even greater, \$165.00 per child/per year. The Early Childhood Services Operational Plans are saying in effect: Because you were concerned and worked for your children by establishing a pre-school, not under the school boards, you will get less funding.

The Early Childhood Services Program did not consult parents prior to establishing the Program, nor are they represented on the administrative or advisory structure, except at the level of agreeing to established policy. In funding, there is a large inequity between public/separate pre-schools and parent co-operatives. The Early Childhood Services concern for parent involvement is only lip-service and cannot be called "encouraging" or "maximizing" the involvement of parents.

Belief 3:

Services offered by Early Childhood Services need not develop simultaneously. Priorities must be set for phasing-in programs. For example, activities that meet the needs of handicapped children will take precedence over those activities involved in establishing universal early childhood programs. Initially, program development and support will be directed toward children from birth to less than 5 years 6 months and their parents. This will have strong implications for present primary school programs.

Though recognizing that funding is limited, but also recognizing the need for universal early childhood programs (for children, birth to 5 years 6 months), we strongly encourage the Government to continue moving in this area. By doing this, the Government will lead the way for early detection of health, mental and educational handicaps and place themselves in the position to offer remedial and preventative health and education programs for all children.

Belief 4:

Every effort should be made to avoid unnecessary "labelling" of children and parents in Early Childhood Services programs.

While we are in agreement that every effort should be made to avoid unnecessary labelling of children and parents in the Early Childhood Services Programs, one has to wonder how this will be done when children are being labelled in the "Operational Plans"? It will inevitably happen with the existing classifications.

Some concerns of those parents, teachers, community workers, involved in pre-school programs in designated "disadvantaged" areas are the results of identifying (thus labelling) those areas for their children. Separation of "normal" and "disadvantaged" areas create ghettos of psychological and social differences, i.e. inferiority, reinforcement of abnormality. The Worth Commission has cited examples of this approach such as in Great Britain, but has failed to cite the results of this approach to education; this is failure! (see "Educational Research" Vol. 13, p.p. 210-213, June, 1971) Also of serious concern are the values implied by designating "socially disadvantaged" areas. By accepting certain characteristics (high income, high land tax assessment, low public school drop-out rate, secure nuclear family relationships, English speaking, etc.) as indexes of normality; these characteristics are seen as "good" and the opposite characteristics as "bad". This denies the multi-approaches to Canadian lifestyles as seen in Canadian sociology books and in parts of the Early Childhood Services Operational Plans.

The lack of contact before and after the establishment of Early Childhood Services indicates a lack of willingness to learn from experiences and learning processes that have occurred in these areas.

Specialized early education opportunities need to be provided for exceptional children who require particular attention and opportunity. This however does not have to be done by labelling an area DISADVANTAGED. A predominantly Italian area needs additional language teachers for assistance in teaching English as a second language, a class might need a smaller student/teacher ratio because of a high number of children coming from disturbed homes, but all these needs are specific. The needs can be evaluated on the individual grant application, rather than establishing disadvantaged areas; which process has failed elsewhere, making value judgements, and labelling children and parents disadvantaged.

While the Early Childhood Services Program states that every effort should be made to avoid unnecessary labelling of children, the Program itself does exactly that.

Belief 5:

Early Childhood Services should not be viewed as an extension downward of the present primary program.

Though the philosophy of the Worth Commission and the Early Childhood Services, indicate an unwillingness to extend downward the present primary program, there are several aspects of the operational plans of Early Childhood Services, which seem to contradict this. Examples of this are:

1. Early Childhood Services is a branch of the Education Department, and the administrators have an educational, rather than diversified background.
2. Early Childhood Services instructors must have an Alberta teaching certificate with a B.Ed. in Early Childhood rather than other qualifications.
3. School Boards receive more money for programs than non-school board programs.
4. Segregation by age for the purpose of funding. Age classifications are characteristic of the school system.
5. In order to be funded, programs must have a kindergarten licence from the Department of Education. A licence from the Department of Health and Social Development is not sufficient, even though the efforts of these two departments, along with others are supposed to be co-ordinated under Early Childhood Services.
6. Compulsory Local Advisory recommendations for independent programs while suggested Local Advisory Board recommendations for public/separate programs.
7. Structure of administration and advisory councils strongly education oriented.

While the philosophy states an unwillingness to extend downward the present primary program, one is hard put to understand how this will not be done. There does not seem to be any definite preventative principle to prevent this from happening. As the plans presently stand, one can only assume that the primary programs will be extended downward.

Belief 6:

Early Childhood Services should be provided to the children and his family on an optional basis. No child under compulsory school age will be required to attend.

While we are in agreement that no child under compulsory school age should be required to attend, we want to note that under the present operational plans, there is not the option to choose for many parents.

In the areas which did not have a kindergarten operating as of January, 1973, there will not be funding for the school year 1973-1974. Those parents will not have a program to choose.

The programs that have been operating, but without a kindergarten license, will have to continue charging fees. Those with January, 1973 licenses won't. This means that in other order for a parent to make a choice, they will have to be wealthy enough so that paying a fee will not affect them. For those who live on a marginal income, they will have to accept the licensed kindergarten, simply because it is cheaper. This is not a choice.

Of the programs that have been operating, and all with a kindergarten license; some are parent co-operative, or community based, while others are either under the school board or under it's auspices. This difference will again limit options for the parents. Since the independent schools will receive less funds/per child, they will have to charge higher fees than those who operate under the school board and receive full funding. Again this difference, will eliminate the element of choice for the parent, because it will be determined by their economic position in society. For the wealthy, there is choice, for the poor, there is the automatic decision; the least expensive.

Early Childhood Services will be available on an optional basis for those who already have a licensed kindergarten in their area, for the rest of the city, the choice will depend on their economic position.

Having studied the Operational Plans for Early Childhood Services, the Task Force on Early Childhood Services would like to place forward the following recommendations with the hope that those involved in the Early Childhood Services Program will look favourably toward implementing them. Some of the recommendations are redundant but only because they are needed in several areas in order to fully implement the basic Early Childhood Services beliefs.

R E C O M M E N D A T I O N

1. Early Childhood Services maintaining education as one part of a comprehensive service.
 - a) Changes in the administration/advisory structure so that:
 - 1) those in pre-school programs be contacted for their input into guidelines and policies;
 - 2) change the stakeholders on the Early Childhood Services Co-ordinating Council to include representatives from parents groups (Alberta Association for Young Children), minority groups (Alberta Metis Association, Alberta Indian Association), medical groups, social workers (Preventive Social Service Director) etc., so that a wider spectrum of not professional educators can partake in developing specific guidelines and policies;
 - 3) establishment of communication networks to ensure citizen/parent input into the program.

2. Early Childhood Services encouragement and maximizing involvement of parents.
 - a) parent representation on Early Childhood Services Co-ordinating Council;
 - b) equality in funding between parent/community programs and school board programs;
 - c) consultation with parents who have been involved in operating a pre-school program, in regards to policy making and directions for guidelines.

3. Early Childhood Services Phasing-in program.
 - a) encouragement to proceed rapidly in this area.

4. Early Childhood Services efforts to prevent unnecessary labelling of children and parents.
 - a) establishing additional funding on individual school/class needs rather than "disadvantaged" areas.

5. Early Childhood Services providing methods by which a downward extension of the primary program is insured.

- a) Early Childhood Services administrators have diversified background, rather than purely educational;
- b) teaching qualifications, from other provinces, other countries, be assessed in terms of experience, training, etc., rather than on the criteria of having a B.Ed. with a major in Early Childhood;
- c) equal funding for school board and independent programs, providing they are not profit-making;
- d) eliminate age classification and base classification of individual child maturity;
- e) licensing for kindergartens be provided by an inter-departmental body, rather than solely the Department of Education;
- f) all applicants be required to have the Local Advisory Board recommendations;
- g) change in administration and advisory structure to include parents and other department levels.

6. Early Childhood Services provided on optional basis.

- a) evaluation of January, 1973, deadline for kindergarten licensing requirement for funding, and evaluate needs of individual programs for that age level;
- b) equal funding for licensed programs, with action in the direction of providing funding for all programs meeting requirements as defined in the philosophy.