

Notes on Conference workshops, by Marcel Lauzière

The 650 conference participants divided up to attend 34 workshop sessions on everything from recognizing quality child care to working with different levels of government. Over 50 speakers made presentations. Yet despite the diversity of topics and perspectives, agreement emerged on some fundamental issues.

The quad principles of Quality, Universality, Accessibility and Development were repeatedly brought up, individually and as a whole. Consensus emerged that we need a holistic, integrated system, based on those principles. To achieve this we need a vision, a sense of direction – no one wants more of the same haphazard development that has occurred in the past.

Participants looked at many of the different challenges which need to be overcome to create a system which embodies these principles. They most frequently discussed the following issues:

- **Governance**
- **Funding / Financing**
- **Quality**
- **Public Policy / Family Policy**

Further notes on the workshops will therefore be divided into these categories. This is not to say that there were no other topics of discussion. On the contrary, a whole variety of concerns were discussed, from how to integrate school-aged children into a child care system to what role that system could play in economic development. But the four topics above formed the core, recurrent themes of the discussion, and as such deserve further elucidation.

1. Governance

The importance of federal leadership was frequently mentioned. There was a different perspective from many of the Québec participants, but no one wants to see the Federal government get out of child care, quite the contrary.

Sustained, predictable federal funding was identified as crucial – there was a strong feeling that the federal government needs to be in this for the long term.

Many also felt that funding to the provinces should be conditional on fulfillment of certain criteria. This should not be a “big stick” approach. Provinces should participate in creating effective measurement, reporting and accountability frameworks.

Accountability

Participants called for much more accountability than presently exists. There was a lack of clarity as to how accountability should be defined, but a rich and positive implicit understanding of accountability emerged from the discussion. There was consensus that accountability is about much more than dollars – it should include:

- Sustainable plans, both provincial and federal
- Public reporting
- Public engagement, particularly stakeholder participation
- Measurement
- Clear and relevant information and data

Legislation

The need for legislation came up a number of times but there was little discussion of timelines. It was not clear whether Federal legislation needed to be the starting point for the creation of a system, or whether it could entrench the system sometime down the road. Most agreed that legislation would be desirable. Here again, Québec participants had a different perspective

Provinces

Federal leadership does not mean letting the provinces off the hook – they also need to be accountable. The provinces need to have a vision and a commitment to child care, make it a priority, and fulfill certain conditions.

Municipalities - Clearly municipalities have a role to play - a crucial one, in some parts of the country - but there was less discussion about this. This is one issue where there is a need for more thought and discussion.

Aboriginal Populations

Participants agreed that Aboriginal populations should play a strong role – amounting to ownership - in the creation and running of their child care services. They should particularly be able to control:

- Regulations
- Accountability structures
- Evaluation
- Curriculum
- Training

Aboriginal communities should also be able to integrate child care policies into their wider family and social policies. It was mentioned that this is already the case on reserves and in some cases off reserve.

With regard to general governance, there was much talk of the importance of horizontal and vertical integration among jurisdictions and across different levels of government.

2. Funding/Financing

This key message emerged:

There is a need for transformative change from a user fee/subsidy approach to a publicly funded, not for profit, universal child care system.

Some argued that currently existing private child care must be engaged in a smooth transition to a system of non-profit child care.

Concerns relating to NAFTA were raised repeatedly. There was agreement that if we are committed to a non-profit system, then we need to be extraordinarily careful as we move forward to ensure that NAFTA regulations do not allow a takeover by large private operators. This has been the case in the U.S. and Australia, as was warned in a Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) report released prior to the conference.

To ensure universality, the following were identified as areas where there is a need for additional financial support: Children with special needs, aboriginal populations, new Canadians, and rural or remote areas.

3. Quality

Quality was identified as a key area for policy development. The need for a strategy around hiring, training and remuneration of workers was in turn identified as crucial to ensure quality. The following emerged as important components of such a strategy:

- Appropriate Training of personnel
- Availability of quality post-secondary programs
- Availability of graduate training programs
- Ongoing professional development
- Need for research/training agenda
- Adequate pay and benefits
- Staff of diverse background, able to be responsive to diverse needs

Participants also emphasized that a system that is integrated, holistic and seamless will produce the highest quality education and care. Likewise a child care system that is flexible and

responsive to local and cultural needs and to special needs will be far more effective and a “one size fits all” model. .

4. Public Policy

There was consensus that it is important to anchor a child care system in a family policy framework. Many participants agreed that Québec has got it right in this regard.

Also, there was agreement that family policy itself must be understood in relation to other areas such as labour policy. The system must be sensitive and responsive to the following:

- How paid work is organized
- Women’s equality and long tem financial security / labour participation of women
- All types of families regardless of what parents are doing
- Integrating support for parents and families including parental/maternity leave