



August 6, 2008

Early Childhood Learning Agency
Ministry of Education
PO Box 9158 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, BC
V8W 9H3

Re: Early Childhood Learning Agency Consultation Paper Review Response

The BC Recreation and Parks Association (BCRPA) appreciates the opportunity to review the Consultation Paper "Expanding Early Learning in British Columbia for Children Aged 3-5" prepared by the Ministry of Education. We have circulated it to members of our Association for feedback.

Our members have alerted us to the fact that the proposed changes will have a profound impact on the parks and recreation system. We offer the following observations and suggestions for your consideration as you pursue the discussion on early learning in BC.

- **Guiding Principles/Standards**

Activities and programs for children must be **developmentally appropriate** and **diverse**. If they are too regimented and academically oriented, they will not be suitable for early learners.

Recreational preschool programs for 3 and 4 year olds typically run for 1.5 to 2 hours because short-duration, structured experiences are developmentally more appropriate for this age group. After the concentration of a preschool "class time," most 3 and 4 year olds have achieved the optimal benefit, and need to go back to a smaller grouping of children and caregiver, in a more home-like environment.

In addition, the importance of finding a balance of both structured and **unstructured learning** must be highlighted. Research supporting the importance of **play-based learning** is showing that children need lots of time for free play in rich environments.

Teacher and/or leader qualifications for working with this group must be examined and incorporate ECE qualifications. We currently have early childhood practitioners in BC. Consideration must be given to them during the process of expanding early childhood learning. Will there be methods to transition these practitioners into this new system?

- **Environment**

Both **family and community involvement** must be included in the design of an early childhood learning system. During these critical years, young children are still bonding with their parents. Preschool programs of 2 hours or less have been effective in providing an appropriate transition for the very young through a gradual entry process which starts them on a healthy path to their school careers.

Precautions should be taken to ensure that we are providing experiences that encourage families to learn together. It would be beneficial for everyone if we provide programs that encourage families to be more involved with their children, not less involved. Learning through play and parental involvement has long been the hallmark of public recreation, offering choice in staffing, times, and availability.

Class sizes and teacher-to-student ratios will need to be evaluated to ensure the use of appropriate numbers to support healthy child development. Children need lots of time for free play in a rich environment, and in interactions with adults and other children in small, informal groups and settings.

The **quality and quantity of facilities** available will need to be examined. Some schools in the province presently provide full-day kindergarten. Pressures on the already-strained childcare system could also increase. Other settings in the community beyond schools should also be considered since many schools don't have the space, and there are currently many operators providing a similar service. In addition, school-based settings may be too formal for some communities.

Currently many programs offered through the parks and recreation sector for this age group occur during the typical school hours, as space is available. The proposed changes could potentially increase the demand during the peak times if schedules are altered to reach this group either before or after the school-based programs. In addition, the school age cohort increasing by one year will mean that an additional cohort will be funneled into recreation programs after school at the same time as the rest of the school cohort. The **logistical implications** of altering the child care service system will be profound.

Services should be developed in ways that meet the needs of children and their families. For some, this may mean part-time programs that are shorter than a school day, while for many families with parents working outside the home, this may mean programs that are longer than a school day.

- **Early Childhood Learning System**

Early childhood services, whether called play, recreation or education must be delivered **holistically**. Many early childhood educators in this province are already providing a high quality service through private, non profit and public recreation programs. Children and families may be better served by expanding and supporting these already existing services as well as providing more affordable, quality childcare.

Early childhood services must be designed as a coherent service.

Communication regarding this system must be made clear. Educating parents and the educators to ensure that informed decisions are being made with a child-first focus is essential so that longer school hours are not simply seen as better.

In addition, **transition planning** would need to occur to ensure that there is appropriate time for change and assistance for providers who are involved with children's services. For those with space and/or staffing allocated to childcare services, the proposed changes will create tremendous challenges for coordination and planning.

Funding for the proposed system would also need to be adequate. Can this initiative be implemented without reducing provincial support to existing specialty programs, targeted to specific communities and families in specific circumstances, and providing specialized services that won't be part of a generalized pre-kindergarten/kindergarten curriculum?

The Expanding Early Learning in British Columbia Consultation Paper raises many questions. Children aged 3-5 are at critical stages of development and thus this topic deserves more research, study and discussion. The need for a system-wide approach to improving early learning and care services for BC children and their families is well-recognized and supported; however, we believe that more consultation around the specific attributes of a new system, and its implementation, is required. We would like to encourage you to invite a variety of service providers to this discussion and put the early childhood educator community in the forefront of this discussion.

The BCRPA is a not for profit organization dedicated to building and sustaining active healthy lifestyles and communities in BC. Established in 1958, the Association is a central resource agency for members and stakeholders of the parks, recreation, physical activity and culture industry, providing leadership, training and support to help meet national, provincial and local priorities. Through a diverse network of partners and extensive programs and services, BCRPA actively advocates accessibility and inclusiveness to recreation and physical activity and strives to bridge the gap between the recreation and sport system to increase participation from "playground to podium."

Our members would indeed appreciate further opportunities to contribute to consultations and discussions, and be involved in the development of this shared vision for BC's children.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Allard Strutt
Chief Executive Officer

David Graham
President

Invitation to Respond

Please provide the following information about yourself and/or your organization. This will help ensure that the government hears from a wide range of individuals and groups. To help us understand your perspective on the issues, please check the box that best describes you.

- I am a parent with a child under five
- I am a parent with children over five
- I provide child care services
- I am an early childhood educator
- I am a kindergarten teacher
- I am a teacher in Grades 1 to 12
- I teach in a post secondary institution
- I am a researcher
- I am a member of the business community
- I provide health or social services
- I am an interested member of the public
- I am responding on behalf of an organization

If you checked the last box, please provide the name of your organization:

[British Columbia Recreation and Parks Association \(BCRPA\)](#) _____

You do not have to provide your name, but you may do so if you wish:

[Kara Leier, Parks and Recreation Manager](#) _____

Please submit your comments by July 18, 2008.

By mail: Early Childhood Learning Agency, Ministry of Education
Box 9158 Stn Prov Govt, Victoria BC V8W 9H3

Online: www.bced.gov.bc.ca/ecla/

By e-mail: EDUC.earlylearning@gov.bc.ca

Note: *The information gathered in response to this paper will inform recommendations to the government. This is only one of the sources of information that will be considered.*