

QC Wellington: A Community-wide Approach For Improving and Sustaining High Quality Child Care In Wellington County

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Quality Care Wellington (QC Wellington) was initiated to begin the development and implementation of a framework to support high quality child care services across Wellington County. Principles underlying the project include the importance of a collaborative approach that involves the child care community and related child-serving organizations in promoting and supporting high quality care, planning and delivering a range of training and professional development activities, and developing new resources and mechanisms to support quality on an on-going basis.

The project was located in the Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being, an applied, interdisciplinary research centre at the University of Guelph. Funding was provided through Wellington County Social Services, the City of Guelph, and the Ministry of Children and Youth for an initial 18 month period that began in June of 2003. The project included two phases that were rolled out concurrently: (1) a start-up and planning phase that included an assessment of training and resource needs, current levels of quality, and a review of models for providing community-based supports for quality care; and (2) an implementation phase.

THE SPECIFIC GOALS OF THE PROJECT:

At the beginning of our project, we had several main goals.

- 1) To assess existing levels of expertise and the training and support needs of early childhood educators and centre directors, and those involved in the provision and support of licensed home child care; and to identify impediments to quality that exist within Wellington County's child care services.
- 2) To plan and deliver accessible training programs to those involved in the child care programs of Wellington County, including outreach to rural areas to support high quality child care provision.
- 3) To plan and deliver training programs and improve resource provision in ways that relate specifically to promoting a philosophy of developmentally appropriate practice and quality inclusive practice throughout Wellington County to meet the needs of children with special needs.
- 4) To develop a community-based framework that links across child care programs and with partnering agencies to facilitate the co-ordination of resource sharing, training, mentoring and professional development.

Project Activities were expected to contribute to several outcomes, including:

- Increased participation of child care centre staff and directors in workshops and professional development activities, with commensurate positive impacts on staff attitudes, competencies, and quality care provision;
- Inclusion of child care staff and other partners in a systemic, sustainable approach to supporting high quality care provision across the County;

- Improvements in supports for high quality inclusive practice in child care programs and home child care;
- Suggestions for further innovations -- potentially an accreditation approach or other means to recognize improvements in quality care provision in centres and home child care.
- Establishment of a long-term education and training plan to guide future planning of child care services throughout Wellington County.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES:

QC Wellington staff engaged in a variety of different activities over the course of the project. Key among them were the following:

- * Establishment of QC Wellington as a Presence in the Community

QC Wellington now has a distinct presence in the child care community and is recognized among the broader range of child-serving organizations. The QC Wellington website provides timely information about new research, resources, and upcoming training events in Guelph and Wellington County. Presentations about the project have been made in various meetings, including a recent information sharing fair about services for children and youth. Project staff have participated in many community events over the last 18 months, including child care and children's services planning and networking meetings. Project materials have been sent to all child care programs. Two guest editorials contributed by the project coordinator were printed in the Guelph Mercury in celebration of National Child Day.

- * Participation in Planning Meetings, Information Sharing and in Coordinating a Training and Professional Development Committee

Following a period of introductory formal and informal meetings, QC Wellington staff met on several occasions with representatives from the Community Mental Health Clinic who are responsible for coordinating supports to child care programs that include children with identified special needs and for providing related workshops. These meetings evolved into a larger Training and Professional Development Committee with meetings hosted by QC Wellington to facilitate coordination and longer-term planning in the development of training and professional development activities. A Project Advisory Group also provided an important vehicle for considering ways to coordinate with others to effectively meet project goals. QC Wellington staff participated on the Wellington Children's Services Council and attended meetings of the *Our Children, Our Future* planning committee and meetings of Child Care Professionals (a network of centre supervisors).

- * QC Wellington's Direct Involvement in Training and Professional Development

QC Wellington was involved in three major activities to enhance quality care in Guelph-Wellington. QC Wellington planned and hosted two full-day training sessions on "Quality Inclusive Child Care" that attracted over 100 participants, including supervisors and staff from child care programs, licensed family day care workers and home visitors, early interventionists, and representatives from the Ministry of Children and Youth. The project also hosted an evening session on "Promoting Resiliency in Young Children" that showcased a new model that

is being developed for early childhood educators. A third direct activity has been offering centres the opportunity to have QC Wellington staff assess their program using standardized observational measures, and engaging with them in a consultation process to identify specific changes that could be made to enhance program quality and children's development. To date, 13 child care programs have participated in the quality consultations. This method provides detailed information to centre directors and staff and is aimed at enabling them to work together to set and reach goals for short and longer-term positive changes in their centre.

* QC Wellington's Participation in Resource Development to Support Quality Child Care

In collaboration with three Early Years Centres in Wellington County (located in Guelph, Fergus and Harriston), QC Wellington has developed resource libraries for child care workers, including private home day care providers. The materials cover a range of topics, but focus on program quality and inclusion quality in particular. The libraries are a collaborative activity, with suggestions for holdings made by QC Wellington project staff, Advisory Group members, early interventionists, and child care staff themselves. The Early Years Centres manage the lending of materials and provide access to them in Guelph and in rural areas of the County. The QC Wellington website is an additional resource that provides information for the child care community that has been updated throughout the project.

* QC Wellington's Involvement in Research to Examine Issues Affecting Quality in Child Care Programs and in Home Child Care Provision

QC Wellington staff have conducted interviews and focus groups with private home child care administrators and home visitors and with centre supervisors, plus separate surveys of home child care providers and early childhood educators in group programs across Wellington County. This research provided detailed information about child care provision in Guelph-Wellington. A key purpose in conducting the research was to identify issues that should be addressed systemically to improve service quality. Each group has identified priority issues and needs for training and resources that can and should be met through future activities. In addition, QC Wellington staff have begun a process of reviewing several mechanisms that might be used to address the needs of the child care community for training, resources and support on a continuing basis. We have gained information from neighbouring communities and from research and demonstration projects on accreditation and consultation processes for centres and family day care providers. A third research activity in which QC Wellington staff collaborated was a survey of parents using licensed child care that was undertaken by the Early Years Centre and Wellington County Child Care Services.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT QUALITY CHILD CARE IN GUELPH-WELLINGTON:

For the Love of the Job

The child care workforce in Wellington is dependent on workers' "love of the job," and *not* on adequate compensation for a career that requires post-secondary education and demands ongoing professional development, compassion, and high commitment. We have observed many situations where supervisors, early childhood educators, and providers have worked against such odds in order to deliver high quality, *energized* early childhood education and care in this community. Child care workers in Wellington County are committed individuals who are

making a substantial contribution to the well-being of children and families in our community, and deserve much greater remuneration and recognition for all that they do.

Keeping in mind that child care programs are relatively equal in their fixed costs per child, such as the cost of food and equipment; and, that parent fees are, for the most part, comparable - the component, or piece of the pie that is subject to the most variation becomes wages. There is no standard for an adequate wage in child care in Wellington and no wage scale differential commensurate with increases in education and experience, taking on new responsibilities, and participating in ongoing professional development activities. Both the general underfunding of child care programs and low staff wages have an impact on so many factors with respect to quality:

- Staff morale and high rates of turnover in child care programs (We witnessed this on more than one occasion where we returned to a program after a quality consultation, only to find that the worker we observed had left the program)
- Supervisors doing double duty: providing child care “on the floor” and at the same time needing to carry out their extensive administrative responsibilities
- Inconsistencies in access to supply staff between programs
- Limited budgets for new toys and materials, curriculum resources, and support for staff’s participation in professional development activities

Building Community

A common theme throughout this research process has been the need for an enhanced system of networking for child care workers: one that engages all of the stakeholders and that provides opportunities for mutual support, professional development, and enhanced understanding of mechanisms of service delivery.

Throughout this study, we have witnessed many examples of effective networking in formal and informal ways. Given that there are already a few mechanisms for networking in this community – including *Our Children, Our Future*, Supervisors’ networks in rural Wellington and in Guelph, and *Child Care Professionals*, it appears that what child care workers are hoping for is more facilitation in their networking processes. There is an energy and motivation in the child care community to reach out to build broader liaisons among programs, and between child care programs and other child and family service organizations, and to create a comfort zone where all programs and child care workers feel that they are welcome participants in networking opportunities.

Quality within Child Care Programs in Wellington

In Wellington County, the child care community has a highly skilled, well educated work force (more than 50% of licensed home child care providers have attended university or college; 85% of ECEs have a college diploma or university degree). We have had the luxury of observing a number of the early childhood educators and supervisors “in action” in child care programs across Wellington County during the QC Wellington quality consultations. A familiar reaction to our feedback was one of surprise – particularly when we were pointing out dimensions and items where programs and the early childhood educators received a high rating. Child care workers, understandably, are often consumed with their daily responsibilities and unable to recognize the “quality within” their program. All programs we observed had their own particular strengths -- whether it was a creative use of the sensory bin or of materials for imaginative play; helping a child to use communication in problem solving with others; making good use of snack

time to engage in conversation with the children; or supporting colleagues when they were struggling with an activity or an interaction.

Early childhood educators, supervisors, and home child care providers all show their commitment to this field by bringing energy and ideas to their day to day programming, by participating in professional development opportunities, by doing a great deal of program planning (often unpaid and on their own time), and by supporting one another. Building a framework to support and sustain quality starts with recognizing the good work that is already being done in child care settings in this community and responding to the range of issues that early childhood educators, program supervisors, licensed home child care providers and family day care workers and administrators have identified.

Spreading the Word about Child Care Quality in Wellington County

Recognition for child care workers *is* growing in this community.

- In November 2004, the County of Wellington celebrated child care programs during the first annual child care Awards of Excellence celebration.
- A large majority of surveyed parents who are using licensed child care in Wellington County indicate that they are very satisfied with the care that their children are receiving.
- The Guelph Chamber of Commerce has also joined the action with a recent article on workplace child care in their fall publication (McKee, 2004).
- Many local supervisors are demonstrating a strong sense of empowerment in their comments about the need to work *with* their licensors, and to advocate on behalf of child care quality and developmentally appropriate practice. Dixie Lee vanRaalte, during the QC Wellington training event in February 2004, encouraged the child care community to collaborate with – even to educate, Ministry officials on what we know to be the best programming and care for young children.

Inclusion Quality

In Wellington County all considerations about child care quality implicitly assume a commitment to inclusion quality. In recent years, there have been significant changes in the delivery of resource supports for children with special needs in child care programs. The shared-centre based model of service delivery, in which one early interventionist is attached to a small number of child care programs, is intended to provide the best of the itinerant resource teacher model ...

- Effective use of child care resource funding to allow all programs in Wellington to have equal access to early interventionist support, thus improving access and equality across the county for parents of children with special needs making choices about child care, and
- Early childhood educators and early interventionists work collaboratively in providing inclusive programming

and the best of the centre-based resource teacher model ...

- Early interventionists have smaller case loads than that which is typical for itinerant resource teachers, and

- Early interventionists are more familiar with the individual child care programs' philosophical and pedagogical approaches, curricula, children and families, and staff members.

Child care programs are adjusting to the changes in resource service delivery, and despite the inevitable speed bumps in any change process - are continuing to provide inclusive programming every day, and are continuing to advocate on behalf of staff and on behalf of children and families in their care for high quality supports for inclusion. Staff are requesting more training and workshops on various aspects of inclusion, and want to develop more skills and more confidence in adapting their program to meet the needs of all children in the community.

Unmet and Emerging Needs

Each sector within the child care community has identified specific needs for training and additional resources. Many are interested in best-practice examples and demonstrate a strong desire to improve their current practices. In effect, the community, broadly speaking, has adopted a learning culture - one that accepts the importance of ongoing learning and skill development, networking, and the availability of helpful resources as important underpinnings for improving and sustaining quality care.

Several important challenges are evident that affect services in Guelph-Wellington. These include: addressing structural issues that continue to result in low wages and limited work-related benefits for early childhood educators and home child care providers; administrative issues that affect parents' access to licensed home child care; and the lack of designated resources that can be used specifically to support quality improvement initiatives. These issues are not unique to Guelph-Wellington. They reflect limitations that result from current provincial policies and administrative decisions.

In the next few years, however, we can anticipate a number of important changes that will impact on our community. These will include efforts to increase the supply of early learning and child care programs and make them more affordable to parents, and the introduction of junior kindergarten by the Upper Grand District School Board. These changes will affect existing programs and add substantially to the need to recruit and retain committed child care staff at all levels in a changing environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. *That Wellington County Child Care Services and the City of Guelph request a dedicated allocation of funds from the provincial government to fund a child care resource centre or agency with a clear mandate to work in collaboration with community partners to promote and sustain high quality child care services.*

There is a clear need for a funded body (a child care resource centre or coordinating agency) that can serve as a catalyst, coordinator, and central resource for a range of activities that can help support well-planned initiatives to improve and sustain high quality child care provision in Guelph and Wellington County. A variety of agencies and groups currently provide some training and support to the child care community and some new groups are forming or

becoming more active. Coordination, joint planning, and information sharing is needed across these groups, as well as a mechanism to insure that specific needs for training and support are addressed effectively and that longer-term planning is initiated and followed. Child care resources centres/agencies exist in other communities. The child care community in Guelph-Wellington does not see any organization or centre that has a mandate to meet its needs.

2. *That the child care resource centre / agency have a mandate to obtain, adapt, and develop a variety of resources (information, best practice guidelines, source lists, non-credit and credit courses) to serve the needs of the child care community and others (e.g., those serving on parent boards or boards of directors, early interventionists and resource consultants, and parents) and to ensure that those resources are accessible and useful.*

The resource centre or coordinating agency should address the diverse needs of different groups within the child care community, as articulated in this report and anticipate needs for support that are likely to emerge within the next 2-5 years.

3. *That the child care resource centre / agency assume a coordinating role and contribute to longer range planning to meet the training and resource needs of child care workers in Guelph and Wellington County.*

The resource centre should build on and support existing systems of child care networking and facilitate information sharing across the child care and children's services communities. The centre should maintain a website and publish a newsletter that can assist in sharing information and perspectives, inform people of upcoming training and events, and increase public awareness of the child care community and child care issues. The centre should facilitate planning for training and professional development across agencies and work with Conestoga College and the University of Guelph to develop Open Learning courses and other means of providing continuing education that responds to the needs of the child care community. A key role of the centre would be promotion of ongoing delivery of training that is responsive to the needs of various sectors within the child care community, as well as training that could be delivered to mixed audiences of care providers, family day care workers, supervisors and ECEs.

4. *That the Centre be resourced to provide consultation and support to promote strategic planning and to enable child care staff in centres to work towards the achievement of quality improvement plans.*

QC Wellington staff had reasonable success in offering quality consultations to 13 child care programs that were well received. This process was lightly modelled after a consultation model developed originally in North Carolina (Partnerships for Inclusion), which is now being used in all four Atlantic provinces with some variations. The focus is on using an initial assessment to engage child care programs in making changes in their centres and to staff practices that promote overall higher quality and support the capacity of the centre to include children with special needs effectively. Research on the consultation model suggests that it is most effective when: the quality facilitators/consultants are knowledgeable and resourceful and develop strong positive relationships with centre directors and staff; directors are supportive of the consultation model and of their staff; directors can allocate some resources to support initial changes in their centres that can be made in the first few months; facilitators/consultants visit the centres every two weeks following the initial assessment and feedback session and work directly with the staff, providing various resources to support them in the process of making

positive changes; there are further points for evaluation to demonstrate the extent of changes made and inform further development of the consultation model. A feature of this model is that it can result in the development of peer mentoring and support.

5. *That the Centre be resourced to develop similar models to promote quality enhancements in licensed family day care homes.*

Researchers at the University of North Carolina are currently engaged in working with family home day care agencies and providers to facilitate quality enhancements and support the effective inclusion of children with special needs in licensed family day care homes. Alternatively, the Elora Home Child Care Accreditation Initiative developed materials (a self-study guide) and model that was well received in a pilot program.

6. *Both research and evidence of best practices should inform initiatives undertaken in Guelph-Wellington to improve and sustain high quality care.*

Local research undertaken for this project has successfully identified critical issues and challenges that should be addressed by a range of initiatives. It is also important to learn from the experiences of other communities that have developed mechanisms and resources to improve and sustain child care quality and effective inclusion supports for children and families and to evaluate efforts as they are made. Collaborations should be fostered, both to utilize resources effectively and to reinforce our collective interests and benefits from having high quality child care provision in Guelph and Wellington County.

7. *That a pool of monies be sought and set aside to assist centres that have identified their areas of need to improve and sustain quality. Funding should also be provided to ensure equitable access and support to supply staff and to address inequities that affect small and rural programs.*

Child care programs themselves have limited (and inequitable) resources to make significant changes in their programs, to purchase new toys and curriculum materials, and to invest in supporting staff to attend conferences and workshops. There is a need for a designated pool of funding for some of these purposes and a way to allocate the resources fairly. There are additional needs to support programs in rural parts of Wellington County. There is a need for strong advocacy work to obtain additional funds for these purposes from governments and to engage the business community in providing additional financial and in-kind support to ensure high quality care for children and families in this community.

8. *That a mechanism be developed to celebrate and recognize annually the professionals who are working in the child care field.*

There is a great need to provide more recognition of the important work done by early childhood educators and home child care providers. Lack of recognition and respect results in low morale which, coupled with low wages, demanding work, and limited benefits are affecting recruitment and retention. As new early learning and child care services are being planned, there is a real danger of not having sufficient trained staff for these programs, as well as a lack of supervisors. Despite the negative aspects, however, there are many dedicated individuals who remain in the field because of their long-term commitment to children and families.

9. *That attention be given to the development of a networking process where common interests are supported and unique needs addressed in a cohesive child care community.*

There are clear differences between home child care provision and group care and each group has unique needs and interests. It is important to provide some activities that are relevant and enjoyable for all caregivers of young children to reinforce common values and support an inclusive child care community. Yet it is also important to meet the unique and important needs of each identified group (home child care providers, family day care workers, early childhood educators, centre supervisors and directors). There are also some unique needs evident among rural service providers and those who provide school-age child care.

10. *That supports for quality inclusion be ongoing through the development of workshops on best practices and that an ongoing process of formative evaluation be conducted to look at issues identified by all professionals, agency partners and parents involved in promoting inclusion quality.*

The effective inclusion of children with special needs in child care programs is a challenging issue. Lack of role clarity, lack of control over resource supports, lack of training and support for ECEs, and poor communication among resource consultants, early interventionists, child care staff and parents are underlying issues. The proposed Centre can have a positive role in sponsoring / conducting workshops on best practices in inclusive child care for child care staff and for early interventionists and others who share the common goal of providing high quality care and education for all children in Wellington County. It is also important to monitor how problems are being addressed and to engage the community in addressing ongoing needs for support.

11. *That the County of Wellington Child Care Services, the child care community, agency partners, and the community at large continue to advocate for policy and administrative changes to support and sustain quality in early care and education services and to improve wages and working conditions for child care staff and home child care providers.*

There are structural /administrative issues that impede quality care provision. Continuing efforts to address these issues is important. A few examples include the need for improved provincial regulations that require additional training for early childhood educators and supervisors and that act as a disincentive for individuals to be part of the regulated home child care system; the need for a policy approach that would provide higher pay for early childhood educators who invest in more education and professional development; fundamental changes in how licensed family day care operations are conceptualized and the development of new administrative arrangements that would allow home day care providers to participate in group insurance and pension plans; and more effective ways of dealing with programs that continually fail to meet licensing requirements. The chronic underfunding of child care programs, the limited resources available to support inclusion in child care programs, and failure to adequately support the needs of rural communities and programs have serious consequences. While training, professional development activities and local supports can have positive effects; these structural problems must be addressed.
