

*For your commitment to the care and education of young children, and for your involvement in providing and enhancing quality in Wellington County, we thank the Early Childhood Educators, Centre Supervisors and Directors, Licensed Private Home Child Care Providers, Family Day Care Workers and Home Visitors, and Managers of Licensed Private Home Child Care Programs, for your participation in the focus groups, interviews, surveys and training events of QC 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 included the importance of a collaborative approach that involved the child care community and 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.

Our promise to you as participants in this research project, was to provide a summary of the findings from the focus groups, surveys, and consultations. The complete report, available in a PDF format, *QC Wellington: A Community-wide Approach for Improving and Sustaining High Quality Child Care in Wellington County* can be accessed on the QC Wellington Website <http://www.uoguelph.ca/~qcwell/>, as can the *Final Report Executive Summary and Recommendations* document.

## What We Discovered: Summary of Findings

### LICENSED PRIVATE HOME CHILD CARE

#### ***Home Visitors, Family Day Care Workers and Managers***

Licensed private home child care is a very important part in the delivery of an overall child care system that is accessible to all families. The small group size, the home environment, the skills of the provider, the supports the provider receives from home visitors (and early interventionists to support inclusion of children with special needs), the location of providers' homes – particularly in smaller communities where there are no centre-based child care programs, and the individualized nature of the programming that children receive in this context are all factors that distinguish licensed private home child care from group care.



In this community, there are two licensed agencies providing private home child care: the County of Wellington and Wee Watch. Home visitors and Family Day Care Workers support providers by way of in-home training and support to providers; by conducting periodic checks to ensure children's health and safety; and by gauging the quality of care and programming in the home.

Through an interview and focus group process, home visitors, family day care workers, and program managers/directors provided information on the current issues in licensed private home child care and the potential barriers to quality, and made suggestions to maximize quality in care in this community. They also provided us with information on characteristics of quality in licensed private home child care, which we summarized into 4 dominant themes: 1) The provider is enthusiastic and recognizes the importance of working with children and families; 2) The private home child care setting is a nurturing environment; 3) There are educational

activities and learning opportunities for all children; and 4) The provider pays attention to children's individual needs.

Licensed private home child care directors/supervisors and staff see that maintaining partnerships in the community; implementing strategies for recruiting and maintaining providers; reviewing the administrative tasks of family day care workers (which could be interfering with their role as a support for providers); and educating the public about – and increasing access to - licensed private home child care regardless of family income are all factors that need to be considered in supporting the provision of quality private home child care in this community.

**Licensed Private Home Child Care Providers**

A large percentage of licensed providers in Wellington County responded to our surveys (54%). One third of the respondents were from Wee Watch and two thirds of the respondents were from the County of Wellington. Almost half of the providers surveyed have one or more of their own children at home while caring for children (43%). Our findings suggest that having their own children at home is an important factor for many of the providers in choosing a career caring for other children: 67% of providers chose this career in order to earn an income while caring for their own children.

One third of the providers have completed College, and 17% have completed university. An interesting finding was that fewer than 10% of the providers have early childhood education qualifications - making this an important consideration when looking at the availability of, and the topics of training and professional development opportunities for providers in this community.

Providers are working long hours each day: the average working day is 10 hours (some providers work as many as 13 hours each day). Three quarters of the providers begin their working day before 7:30 am, and the average time that the last child leaves the home is between 5:00 and 5:30 pm. About half of all providers earn less than \$15,000 per year for full time work. Only 5 of the full-time providers in our sample earned more than \$25,000 per year before deductions. These earnings are typically further reduced by the amount of money that providers spend on furnishings, materials, food and other expenses.

We asked providers who they felt respected by, and almost all of the providers indicated that they felt respected by their closest colleagues, their own families, and the families they provide care for. Only a small number of providers indicated that they felt their work is respected by other child care and children's services professionals.

One third of providers indicated that they have attended Our Children, Our Future workshops in the past year; and almost half (40%) of providers have attended training by their own agency in the past year. The large majority of the providers (93%) reported that they turn to their home visitor or family day care worker for help and advice. While networking has been shown in the research literature to be an important factor in supporting positive feelings about providers' work, in decreasing isolation, and in improving a sense of connectedness with other providers, within the child care field, and with other children's services; we found that only 1/3 of providers are getting together with other providers on a regular basis.



The results of our interviews, focus group and surveys suggest that in Wellington County we currently have a committed, if limited, cadre of home child care providers, most of whom enjoy their work with children, are open to learning, and appreciate the training and support provided by home visitors. There is clearly room for acting on the suggestions made by family day care workers/ home visitors and providers to better meet their individual needs through training and support networks, while improving the visibility and respect that should be accorded to those in this sector. We have also raised the question about continuing current practices that limit parents' access to regulated home child care depending on their eligibility for subsidies. Strategic efforts could also be made to improve recruitment, retention, and recognition of those providers with more education and experience. There is also obvious room for



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building a more inclusive and respectful approach towards licensed home child care within the child care community and the wider children's services community in Wellington County.

Beyond those important steps, however, there are structural and administrative issues that remain to be addressed by agencies and by the provincial government. Among those issues are the lack of funds available to help grow and support the regulated home child care sector; the lack of funds available for capital and quality improvements, including those that would support an accreditation approach (such as the Elora model); and the need to amend regulations and take steps to address structural problems that perpetuate low earnings and difficult working conditions for providers.

Considering that, in Wellington, we are geographically a rural county, it is in our best interests as a community to see that mechanisms are in place to ensure that licensed private home child care is available to families who would prefer this option and is of the highest quality possible.

## CENTRE-BASED CHILD CARE PROGRAMS

### **Early Childhood Educators**

The survey of early childhood educators in Wellington County provided considerable insight in ECEs' roles, wages and working conditions, feelings about their program and about being an early childhood educator, and the factors they feel must be considered to improve and enhance high quality child care provision. While some ECEs are in the favourable position of working in a child care program that provides good wages and benefits, a supportive supervisor and cohesive staff team, opportunities and encouragement to extend their knowledge and participate in networking and professional development opportunities, and the resources to provide a stimulating and varied program for children with sufficient toys and materials, others clearly have a different experience.



Despite the fact that 87% of the early childhood educators who responded to this survey have a college diploma or university degree, the majority are earning wages that are far below the level of others with similar qualifications -- for work that is of immense importance to children, families, and this community. Indeed, half of the ECEs in this sample earned gross wages of less than \$12.50 per hour and three quarters earned less than \$15.00 per hour.

A combination of low wages, limited benefits (e.g., less than one third have an employer-provided pension plan), limited opportunities for promotion, and a lack of recognition and respect for their work frustrates and disappoints a considerable number of ECEs. Lack of funds for child care programs not only affects staff wages, morale and turnover, it also affects centre budgets for children's toys and materials and staff resources that can support stimulating and creative programming. These factors all affect how early childhood educators feel about their work and the likelihood that they will continue. Findings from this survey reveal that only 63% of those surveyed plan to continue as ECEs beyond the next three years and fewer than half say they would choose child care again if they were now making a career choice. Moreover, half of the teachers who have supervisory responsibilities in this sample plan to leave the field in the next three years -- a time when governments hope to expand our current early learning and care programs.

Despite their disappointment and frustration, most ECEs take pride in the quality of care provided to children and families in their centres. Three quarters of our respondents currently have a child with special needs in their group and roughly half have at least one child who does not speak English (or French) as their first language. The majority are proud that their centre is inclusive, but also identify the fact that they want additional training, more regular supports, and, in some cases, greater access to inclusion facilitators to successfully include children with disabilities and/or challenging behaviour in their group program.



ECEs are clear about the issues that their centres face that can compromise the quality of care and the quality of the program as a workplace. Funding is a perennial problem that affects staff and program quality in a number of ways, including the lack of sufficient, varied toys and materials for children and curriculum resources for staff. ECEs' own recommendations for strategies that would enhance program quality across Wellington County favour: providing staff with some regular paid planning and preparation time; training and mentoring for new supervisors and those who wish to become supervisors; greater access to resources, materials and the internet for child care programming information; and improved supports for children with special needs. In addition, addressing the underfunding for programs and the lack of respect and recognition many ECEs feel are critical imperatives for sustaining the commitment this group has to the children and families in Guelph and Wellington County.

**Supervisors**

The focus group process with child care centre supervisors allowed us to gain greater insight into many of the issues identified by the early childhood educators as factors contributing to quality in child care programs in Wellington. We asked the supervisor participants to comment on the "most important" issues for maintaining quality in their programs and across the child care community; the changes that they have made in their programs which have an impact on quality; and how they would like to see a pool of funds used to support quality child care.

A dominant theme in all of the focus groups was low staff wages, which well reinforced our findings from the ECE surveys. Another dominant theme was working conditions (such as supporting staff with staff meetings and providing program planning time). The supervisors also discussed a general lack of access to training and professional development opportunities for themselves and for their staff; and stress and workload issues associated with supervisors' having to juggle their administrative tasks and (often) the need to be "in program." While some of the issues raised in the focus groups were not always experienced by all of the participants – such as the challenges of working with a Board of Directors, or the lack of resources and training specific to school age program needs; they were important considerations when gaining a deeper understanding of the various issues involved in delivering high quality programming in centres and across the county.

Among the most dominant issues that supervisors identified as needing to be addressed across Wellington County were: enhancing supports for children with special needs; community wide supports for attracting and retaining qualified staff and for accessing supply staff; resources and supports for curriculum changes; increased networking and professional development opportunities for staff and for supervisors; greater support, recognition and appreciation for child care services in general and for the multifaceted job that supervisors do; and support for administration tasks that many supervisors viewed as detracting from their abilities to provide strong leadership support to their staff.

Supervisors talked about changes they've made to their individual programs which have enhanced quality, such as a change to the dominant curriculum of the program (to an emergent curriculum); adaptation of policies and enhanced performance expectations & performance evaluations for staff; improved support for planning time; more resources and materials for staff; and increased focus on activities for staff recognition and team work. Supervisors also discussed their involvement in improving relationships with parents and the school system; and shared their thoughts on and experiences with succession planning – for their individual programs, and for the child care community as a whole.



If there were a pool of funds made available to support child care, the supervisors commented that they would like to see those funds go toward: Improving wages for staff and supply staff; improving access to professional development & networking opportunities; developing a third party quality consultation process; developing a system of support for supervisor administrative tasks; enhancing resource libraries; increasing supports for children with special needs; promoting school aged child care; and making training available for members of Boards of Directors.



Many of the supervisors talked about the changes occurring in the local child care community – with some of the visionaries and mentors in the field retiring or preparing to retire; and with the implementation of the Best Start plan of the provincial government. Supervisors agreed that community-wide strategic planning is needed to lessen the impact of the coming changes.

## QUALITY CONSULTATIONS

More than 20% of the child care community participated in the Quality Consultation process of QC Wellington. Using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised Edition (ECERS-R and the ITERS-R for infant/toddler programs), QC researchers would make observations in one or two rooms of the child care program; and then provide narrative feedback to the staff and supervisor of the program. This process allowed us the opportunity to gather valuable information by observing a number of early childhood educators and supervisors in action across Wellington County. A familiar reaction to our



feedback was one of surprise – particularly when we were pointing out dimensions and items where programs and the ECEs received a high rating on the scales. All programs that we observed had their own 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.

Through the consultation process we were able to observe some of the common issues and difficulties in programming across the centres. No one program demonstrated difficulties in all areas listed, in fact – as mentioned above – every program had a particular strength in at least one area of the ECERS-R or ITERS-R. Some of the common difficulties among child care programs were:

- **Providing multi-textural materials** – especially an abundance of soft materials for all children.
- **Providing designated spaces in the room for children’s individual privacy** and providing opportunities for “respite” within the programming room for children to remove themselves from the group (find a moment of peace) throughout the day.
- **Promoting acceptance of diversity** with respect to culture, abilities, and non-gender stereotyped roles in society as an approach woven through all activities, in materials and toys, and in room display.
- **Promoting literacy by using a variety of approaches** and using, and advocating for approaches that are most developmentally appropriate for young children.
- **Using music and movement activities, and having instruments available every day** to support creative expression, language development, gross and fine motor development, and an appreciation of diverse cultures.
- **Enhancing the dramatic play area and extending dramatic play activities** to encourage role playing, fantasy play, language development, social-emotional development, and an appreciation of all aspects of diversity
- **Using, developing, and feeling comfortable with science, math and nature activities** including making use of approaches that engage children in learning about their relationship with nature and their social and physical environment
- **Having regularly scheduled visits from early interventionists** to support the inclusion of children with special needs in programming.
- **Using opportunities to enhance informal interactions and communication** such as during free-play, meal times, and transition times.
- **Providing appropriate physical resources for staff** to ensure their comfort and to support them as employees - such as separate, clean, accessible washrooms and a private staff room.
- **Supporting staff with regular staff meetings, regularly scheduled breaks, and paid planning time**
- **Exploring the impact of changes to the curriculum** and ensuring documentation processes - especially when changing from a theme-based to an emergent approach.

