



POLICY BRIEF

Translating early childhood research evidence to inform policy and practice

Case Study: Toronto First Duty

This case study examines the Toronto First Duty program, a model for effective and successful integrated early childhood community services.

Toronto First Duty (TFD) was established in 2001 as a partnership of the City of Toronto, the Toronto District School Board and community agencies supported by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation. The project is supported by resource development and a robust research agenda.

“The goal of TFD is to develop a universally accessible system that promotes the healthy development of children from conception through primary school, while facilitating parents’ work or study and offering support to their parenting role. It informs public policy by implementing the central recommendation of the Early Years Study for a ‘first-tier program for early child development ... The system should consist of community-based centres operating at the local level within a provincial framework.”

The model pioneered by TFD envisions how existing programs can combine regulated child care, kindergarten and family support services into a single, accessible program, located in schools and coordinated with early intervention and family health services.. A team of kindergarten teachers, early childhood educators, family support staff and teaching assistants plan and deliver the program. Space and resources are combined. There is a single intake procedure and flexible enrolment options. Children and families are linked to specialised resources as required.

The Bruce/WoodGreen Early Learning Centre (BWELC)

Five sites were originally selected as Toronto First Duty sites, each sponsored by a community agency. The practices of integration demonstrated by Toronto First Duty carried forward into system-wide changes in Toronto and in Ontario. The Bruce/WoodGreen Early Learning Centres continue as prototypes.

Five elements define TFD program delivery:

1. **Integrated governance:** The partners pool their resources to plan and deliver the program. At the BWELC, Bruce Public School and WoodGreen Community Services are the lead site partners. The school principal and centre manager jointly supervise the program. The management committee includes government department representatives, parent representatives and a charity.
2. **Seamless access:** There is one enrolment process which allows parents to access the range of activities the program offers. Participation is flexible – parents may attend at anytime with their children.
3. **Staff teams:** The program is delivered by a teaching team of early childhood educators, kindergarten teachers, parenting workers and assistants. The team approach brings a range of expertise to the classroom and allows more individualised attention for the children.
4. **Integrated early learning environment:** The school’s classrooms are licensed, and meet Toronto’s child care operating standards. This allows for multi-use of space, supports child

development goals and enhances health and safety standards. The curriculum meets the expectations of the Ministry of Education's program for the first year of school as well as the provincial early childhood program curriculum framework. Combining these approaches provides a better learning environment for children, and removes the many transitions that children this age experience as they move from child care to kindergarten and back again.

5. **Parent participation:** Parent participation is paramount. Parents are involved in the governance structures. They are welcome to take part in all the Centre's activities at all times. This includes eating lunch or snacks with their children, joining in their classroom and outdoor activities and participating in programs designed for parents/caregivers on their own and with the children.

To measure progress towards integrated service delivery, the Indicators of Changeⁱⁱⁱ tool was developed. This measures progress towards integration within each of the five core elements of TFD. Specific indicators identify practices at five benchmark levels – from co-location to integration. In effect Indicators of Change bridge incremental change and transformational change. The level 5 benchmarks define an integrated system one that would require a new operating system, including consolidated legislation, governance and funding. They also outline incremental steps that are possible in local communities within the existing policy context.

Major findings of TFD research

TFD set out to redefine the delivery of programs for young children. The research^{iv} found benefits for children, parents, staff and communities, identified specific practices of integration and informed policy recommendations:

- Integrated early childhood programming that paid attention to involving parents increased parents' engagement with schools, early childhood programs and their own children's development.
- Universal access to integrated program delivery did not squeeze out disadvantaged families.
- Child care is essential, but remains the component that is most difficult to incorporate and expand in an integrated model.
- Integration can be accomplished within current staff but requires a realignment of job responsibilities, time for program planning and shared professional development.
- Leadership, particularly from the school principal, is a make-or-break variable. Both the support and the direct involvement of the principal are necessary.
- New investments should complement and extend existing services, not add to them.
- Integrated programming serves more children for the same costs as traditional delivery.
- Sustainable change requires an overhaul of legislative requirements, professional education, funding mechanisms and governance structures from the ministry through to the program management.
- Regular assessment and evaluation provide accountability. Shared with practitioners, they support program quality and contribute to improved child outcomes.

Jane Bertrand
School of Early Childhood
George Brown College Toronto
Ontario, Canada

ⁱ McCain, M.N. and Mustard, J.F. (Eds.) (1999). **Reversing the Real Brain Drain: Final Report of the Early Years Study**. Canada: Government of Ontario p. 23

ⁱⁱ Ontario Best Start - www.beststart.org

ⁱⁱⁱ See http://www.toronto.ca/firstduty/indicators_oct2005.pdf for Indicators of Change documents

^{iv} See www.toronto.ca/firstduty for full research reports