



# Council of Associated Primary Educators

Formerly known as Consultant/Coordinators' Association of Primary Educators

CAPE (Council of Associated Primary Educators) is pleased to submit this position paper in response to the Ministry of Education discussion, *Building the Next Phase in Ontario's Education Strategy*. This is a very exciting and critical time for primary education in Ontario and CAPE is pleased to add its voice to this important discussion.

## Question 1

*What are the skills, knowledge and characteristics students need to succeed after they have completed school, and how do we better support all learners in their development?*

Michael Fullan's document (2013, *Great to Excellent*, pp. 8-9) outlines the six Cs: Character Education, Citizenship, Communication, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Collaboration, Creativity and Imagination that he believes form the agenda for the future. These are the enduring qualities that students will need for future success. Of these six, we feel those that focus on personal and social development, i.e., Character Education, Citizenship, and Collaboration are critical characteristics for student's success after they have completed school. Too often, in the past, the focus of 'schooling' has been primarily on Communication (Literacy) with a secondary focus on Critical Thinking and Problem Solving (Mathematics). While these skills are unarguably essential for success in the modern world, unless they are combined with the disposition to go on learning, they will not serve students well as ongoing learners. This disposition towards learning, sometimes called habits of mind, is best developed when the focus is on learning, rather than on teaching.

One way to promote this perspective is to see learning as a partnership. Fullan calls this a "new pedagogy" that sees fundamental shifts in the roles of teachers and students. When this shift occurs, teachers change their focus and become interested in how students are making sense of their world, rather than focusing primarily on teaching. They realize that connecting with children's 'working theories' is essential to promoting enduring understanding, curiosity, creativity and imagination in their students. In this pedagogical shift, both 'teacher' and 'student' are learners and the student's voice is as important and respected as that of the teacher's; together, they become co-constructors of knowledge and understanding. This also gives children a sense of responsibility for their own learning and well-being and helps them develop the self-regulation that is considered essential to success in all aspects of life (Shanker in Ontario MOE, 2013b, pp. 21-26).

When this co-construction of understanding is focused on issues of equity, diversity and sustainability, students not only feel compelled to take responsibility for their own learning but also for the wellbeing of all citizens and the environment. This type of collaborative

responsibility for self and others is at the heart of Character Education and Citizenship, essential for both the success of individual students, but also for the future of our society.

This shift may require a different view of children than has been traditionally understood. We support the view expressed in the Ontario Ministry of Education Early Years Policy Framework (2013a, p. 7). *We view children as competent, capable of complex thinking, curious, and rich in potential. They grow up in families with diverse social, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. Every child should feel that he or she belongs, is a valuable contributor to his or her surroundings, and deserves the opportunity to succeed. When we recognize children as capable and curious, we are more likely to deliver programs and services that value and build on their strengths and abilities.*

In summary, students need to be their own teachers. They need to be able to access and view information with a critical lens. We need to continue to encourage students to seek out answers to their questions and validate their ideas. If this happens they will become confident in their abilities and find creative solutions to be successful productive citizens in an ever changing and fast paced technological world.

## **Question 2**

*What does student well-being mean to you, and what is the role of the school in supporting it?*

The school needs to address students' social, emotional and physical well-being. If these needs are not met, learning will become much more difficult. The school community needs to create a safe and comfortable environment for students to become enthusiastic, active participants in their own learning and feel comfortable enough to be risk-takers. This attention to basic physical needs and the need to belong is a lesson learned from rich early childhood experiences in the child care sector, where 'good care educates and good education cares'. In this context, student learning cannot be separated from student well-being, they are interdependent. This model also borrows from the psychological theories of Abraham Maslow in which physiological, safety and belonging needs are viewed as fundamental, and must first be met if the goals of esteem and self-actualization, critical factors in student's well-being and learning, are to be realized.

These factors are all related to children's mental health. When student's physical needs are met, when they feel safe and are fully included in the environment, they feel good about themselves. Their need for esteem has been met, they develop resilience and are empowered to deal with the challenges that they may encounter in school and beyond. They are much more likely to be 'calmly focused and alert', an arousal state that Dr. Stuart Shanker feels is essential for children to be able to modulate their emotions, ignore distractions and engage more fully in the learning environment (Ontario MOE, 2013b, p. 23).

There are many implications of this comprehensive view of student well-being for the role of the school. For example, physical well-being and safety require appropriate adult/student ratios and class size, purpose built classrooms for young children with adequate space and hygienic washroom facilities, breakfast and snack programs for children who may be hungry, safe and

stimulating child-friendly environments, and educators who understand how to recognize and provide for children's well-being across the broad spectrum of development.

We are aware of the pressures that this government has faced in implementing the Full Day Kindergarten program, particularly in accomplishing full implementation within five years, and we applaud both the responsiveness to current realities of young children and families and the vision that is demonstrated by this commitment. For this responsiveness and vision to be fully realized, particularly within the context of student well-being, the issue of class size must be addressed. Research and best practice clearly demonstrate the links between quality programs and class size for children ages 3-5. It is imperative that the government institute plans as soon as possible to replace the formula of averaging class size in Full Day Kindergarten to a cap, optimally at 20, but minimally at 25 for all FDK classrooms. Unless this issue is addressed, the potential for the forward thinking vision behind this program will not be realized.

The need to belong requires recognition of each child as a unique individual who has the right to be fully included in all aspects of the educational environment. When children have unique individual characteristics (e.g., 'specialness') and/or come from unique backgrounds (e.g., First Nations, newcomers, poverty), they are often marginalized and do not receive the acknowledgement and recognition that their uniqueness suggests. Schools need to do a better job of recognizing the unique talents and backgrounds of all children rather than attempting to fit children into a 'one size fits all' system. Rigid scheduling and expectations, and a concomitant over-emphasis on testing and assessment, undermines tolerance and celebration of a range of abilities and talents, and detracts from a student's overall well-being.

The younger the child, the more damaging this early assessment and labeling is likely to be. We have heard a troubling label, 'struggling readers', used to describe children in Full Day Kindergarten. This term implies a notion of 'school readiness' that we believe is antithetical to the rich view of children adopted in the Early Learning Policy framework (see our response to question 1 above). We prefer the term 'ready schools', a term that implies that schools are ready to receive and celebrate the range of special qualities that each new group of students brings. We are reluctant to evaluate and label these qualities at too young an age. We believe that all young children, from infancy onwards, should be viewed as emergent learners (readers, writers, scientists, mathematicians, musicians, artists, etc.); none should receive labels that imply a deficit model of both children and learning.

As Full Day Kindergarten has been introduced there has been a lack of attention to the need for professional resource support for the children, families and the Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) team when students are experiencing social, emotional, physical, cognitive and/or communicative challenges. These services, (e.g., Resource Consultant, Speech/Language Pathologists, Occupational and Physical Therapists, Psycho-educational Consultants) which were previously available to many of these children when they attended early childhood programs outside of the school system, are not typically available until after a full year or two in FDK and sometimes not until Grade One. This is a contradiction of the original intent of the FDK program which was to give all children the best possible start in school and in life. Rather than giving them a headstart,

this lack of attention can actually be slowing their progress and their overall well-being within the public school system.

In summary, we believe if students feel cared for and cared about, they are more likely to care for and care about their own on-going learning and growth. Attention to these fundamental issues is our responsibility if we are to help children take advantage of the learning environment and realize their full potential, not only for themselves but also for the good of society.

### **Question 3**

*From your perspective, what further opportunities exist to close gaps and increase equity to support all children and students in reaching their full potential?*

As is indicated in the response to Questions 1 and 2 above, we believe we need to broaden our appreciation of what constitutes ‘success’. An over-emphasis on academic and intellectual skills (the 2 Cs of Communication, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving) to the exclusion of the other four Cs detracts from our freedom to acknowledge the broad spectrum of abilities and unique qualities that is reflected in each group of children. Often these overlooked abilities are in areas of the arts, physical development, and sociability, areas that are given relatively little recognition in the traditional view of schooling, but are often the key to enhanced esteem and learning for many students.

Creating a better balance among Fullan’s six C’s may also imply broadening our view of the context in which education occurs. Viewing the learning environment only within the four walls of a classroom diminishes student potential and the opportunity to close gaps and increase equity for all. Learning at all ages is enhanced when children are encouraged to explore and learn in the outdoor environment. Research from Scandinavian countries, with the same climate as Canada, has shown that both the disposition to learn and learning outcomes are enhanced when learning takes place in the outdoors. The same results are found when children are encouraged to be physically active, to explore their world through movement and the arts - visual, music, and dramatic. This will not only enhance learning for all students, it will also increase the likelihood that all children’s learning styles and preferences will be met.

Students must be able to ‘see’ themselves, their way of learning, their cultures and identity within the school environment. When schools and classrooms reflect a strong preference for the dominant culture and the dominant way of learning, an unfortunate atmosphere of privilege and exclusion become the norm. From the earliest years onwards, schools need to provide a clear and positive acknowledgement of the neighbourhoods, families and students that they serve.

#### Question 4

*How does the education system need to evolve as a result of changes to child care and the implementation of full-day kindergarten?*

A focus in both child care and full day kindergarten is on the fundamental and critical importance of relationships. Once children leave kindergarten and get into the ‘big school’ this focus on relationships often shifts to a narrower focus on learning. This is unfortunate both from a psychological and an educative point of view because retaining a focus on relationships is also a key to enhancing learning throughout life. Dr. Jean Clinton, child psychiatrist, cites research on the importance of continuing a focus on relationship building throughout the school years, and how educators play a critical role in building the relationships that are essential if learning is to take place. *Evidence is accumulating that when there is an emphasis on social and emotional learning, with a special focus on positive adult-child interactions, children and young people do well* (Ontario MOE, 2013b, p. 9).

Another important focus in child care and Full Day Kindergarten is inquiry play-based learning. Although this focus may seem unrelated to promoting success throughout the school years, there is strong evidence that focusing on inquiry, and on promoting students’ playful exploration of that which challenges, intrigues and excites them, is a key to ongoing learning at all stages of school and later success in life.

The role of the educator in inquiry, play-based learning is that of documenter and provocateur. The educator’s task is to make student learning visible and explicit, as a springboard to further learning. This documentation can then be used by both the educator and the learner, in a spirit of co-construction, to provoke and encourage further exploration, thereby promoting critical thinking, problem solving, curiosity and imagination. As observers/documenters, educators also notice and support investigations that excite students and dispose them to go on learning. They are attentive to children’s working theories and use these to both clarify and extend learning. In this context, where teachers and students are co-constructing the learning together, the process of learning becomes equally as important as the content. Documentation becomes pedagogical when it is shared with others and is used as a way to study how children learn and the adult’s role in this process (Wien, in Ontario MOE, 2013b, pp. 29-30). This model of learning works as well in a high school mathematics classroom or science laboratory as it does in a kindergarten classroom. It is in sharp contrast to teacher-directed learning activities and knowledge application activities that have been the trademarks of traditional pedagogy.

This changing pedagogy requires educators at all levels of care and education to be professionally educated and appropriately remunerated for the important work that they do. The younger the child, the more important this specialized knowledge becomes. Countries that have high standards of excellence in the early years (e.g., Scandinavia, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia) require university trained early childhood and primary educators who are rewarded with high levels of respect and financial compensation. Educators in this context view themselves as researchers, seeing each aspect of the environment and learning as an opportunity for reflection and ongoing collaboration (Callaghan, in Ontario MOE, 2013b, p 14). They are highly regarded within the

total educational system and are seen as an important resource for educators and policy makers at all levels of education.

There are several structural changes that would also enhance and build on the overall benefits of introducing Full Day Kindergarten into the school system. One of these changes would be to reconsider the traditional divisions of primary and junior in the Ontario school system. Not so very long ago, kindergarten was not even included in this arbitrary distinction of primary (Gr. 1-3) and junior (Gr. 4-6). As the education system has evolved to incorporate our understanding of the importance of the early years, these distinctions tend to be anachronisms from a previous era when formal schooling didn't begin until age 6 or 7, or Grade One. As kindergarten has been increasingly included into the formal school system, an imbalanced division between primary (JK-3) and junior (4-6) has evolved without consideration of the implications of this unnatural division. Now that Full Day Kindergarten constitutes two full years of schooling, the primary division includes five of the most important school years, and junior only three. This causes many inequities both in perception and in reality.

One of the biggest issues is that Grade 1-3 is still really considered distinct from Kindergarten, resulting in a noticeable break in expectations between Kindergarten and Grade One among educators, parents and the public. While inquiry play-based learning and a focus on relationships may be considered acceptable for four and five year olds, when children enter Grade One these expectations and the realities often change to a narrower focus on what is considered formal learning (see Dr. Jean Clinton's comments above). What we propose as a solution to this is a change in thinking about the divisions with particular reference to children from JK-Grade 2. Although we truly believe that a playful, inquiry-based approach to learning is appropriate from birth through adulthood, we feel it is essential for young children, ages 4-8. As indicated above, we also feel this age group should be free from labeling and evaluative testing.

This change would also result in a better balance in placement requirements in Faculties of Education. As it is currently structured, Teacher Candidates are required to do one placement in Primary, JK-3, and one in Junior, 4-6, and can finish their Teacher Education program never having taught children younger than Grade Three. When this is combined with Teacher Education programs that often focus on a traditional view of 'schooling', Teacher Candidates can graduate with little or no understanding of the pedagogy promoted in the Early Years Policy Framework (Ontario MOE, 2013a) and substantiated by research (Ontario MOE, 2013b). If the primary division were structured JK-2, with a strong focus on inquiry play-based learning throughout this division, Faculties of Education would be encouraged to promote this pedagogy and Teacher Candidates would be far better prepared to teach younger children than many currently are. Optimally, this stronger focus on a playful inquiry based education would also influence pedagogy in the junior division.



## **Question 5**

*What more can we all do to keep students engaged, foster their curiosity and creativity, and help them develop a love of life-long learning?*

Building on our response to Question 2, we believe an emphasis on the Arts is a critical factor for many children if they are to be fully engaged in the learning. This emphasis includes honouring the many ways students may represent their learning, an expression that is often referred to as the ‘hundred languages of children’ (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 1998). This broad view of language which includes all aspects of visual and dramatic arts, music, dance, and movement as well as more traditional forms of written expression helps children interpret their own understandings and makes their learning more fully visible to others. Unless these many forms of expression are valued as meaningful representations of what children know and understand, a focus on assessment and evaluation in the traditionally narrow form can become a denial, rather than a representation and celebration of what children know and understand, and how they feel about this learning. This broader view of assessment focuses on the concept of growth, where the role of the educator becomes one who supports and guides the learning from children’s current level of understanding to deeper knowledge; i.e., assessment for learning. This stands in strong contrast to a focus on evaluation of learning against an arbitrary standard that may or may not reflect children’s current ways of making meaning. When evaluation becomes the focus, children’s full engagement, creativity and curiosity may be shut down rather than enhanced.

An important revelation in this context is the reality that some countries that consistently score at the top of international test results; e.g., Finland (OECD 2011, pp. 116-135) do not engage in high-stakes testing or top-down policy and standards for assessment. Rather, their focus has been on developing a culture of trust over time that reflects high levels of commitment to children from birth onwards, a culture that honours excellence both academically and physically, a strong focus on the universality of schooling for all children with high levels of inclusion, a focus on the whole child within the context of the school and a high regard and high expectations for those who enter the teaching profession. These are important lessons for Ontario as we look toward building for the future of schooling in Ontario.

## **Question 6**

*How can we use technology more effectively in teaching and learning?*

We are open to accepting technology as an alternative way to represent learning in a creative and innovative way. Technology is best used as a tool that supports children’s engagement and inquiry rather than a distraction from having a clear focus on learning and growing. When used in this way, technologies (e.g., cameras, video cameras, computers, Smart boards) are a wonderful way for educators and students to capture their current understanding and growth, and to then revisit this documentation to determine where their emerging interests might lead them.

For very young children, we must remember also that technology incorporates any tools that help them understand and engage meaningfully with their environment. This includes construction

learning resources (blocks, building materials), sand, water, riding vehicles, and any interaction with the natural environment that helps children understand the world around them.

### **Question 7**

*In summary, what are the various opportunities for partnership that can enhance the student experience, and how can they benefit parents, educators and our partners too?*

Throughout this response we have emphasized the importance of students experiencing real-life problems, and authentic learning in the real world. Moving beyond the school walls to expand the learning environment and build partnerships with the larger community helps this goal to be realized and engages students in learning that will help them be successful long after they leave the school environment. It also engages the larger community in the shared responsibility for the care and education of our children and youth. These partnerships range from informal connections in which community partners are engaged in the life of the school as volunteers and classroom speakers, programs in which schools participate in broader community, federal and international initiatives, and established programs such as Take Our Kids to Work Day, and High School Co-op programs.

True partnerships acknowledge the respective role of parents, educators, children, youth and the broader community. This is another lesson that can be learned from the child care community who have always engaged in strong partnerships as they share responsibility for the care and education of the children for whom they are responsible. The response to this question takes us full circle back to our original comments about the importance of relationships in successful learning and growth at all ages and across all sectors. When partnerships are based on mutual respect and an acknowledgement that all partners provide important perspectives and insights into the care and education of our young people, then relationships will be strong. These equitable relationships provide an essential foundation for developing a culture that accepts mutual responsibility for the care and education of all children and youth from birth onwards.

In closing, we would like to add one final word about the importance of maintaining strong partnerships with associations representing the educators who work with the children and families such as our own organization, the Council of Associated Primary Educators (CAPE). In this context, CAPE has recently reorganized to open our membership to all educators (OCT and RECE) with direct responsibility for primary education as a way of recognizing the importance of welcoming early childhood educators as full partners in the care and education of our youngest learners. Similar organizations such as the Ontario Association for Junior Educators (OAJE) and the various subject organizations such as Science Teacher Association of Ontario (STAO), Ontario Association of Math Educators (OAME) and the Math Coordinators Association (OMCA) are all valuable resources that support professional learning. It is important for these associations to work in partnership with the Ministry of Education to build opportunities, provide feedback and create resources to enrich supports for children and their families as we build the next phase in Ontario's education strategy.



## References

Edwards, C., Gandini, L., Forman, G., Eds. (1998). *Hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*. Elsevier Science pub.

Fullan, M., (2013) *Great to Excellent: Launching the Next Stage of Ontario's Education Agenda*. Ontario Ministry of Education.

OECD (2011). *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education - Lessons from PISA for the United States*.

Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a. *Ontario Early Years Policy Framework*.

Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b, *Think, Feel, Act: Lessons from Research about Young Children*.