

Early childhood services that work for children, families and islanders

Update, March 2019

CHANCES (Caring, Helping, And Nurturing, Children Every Step) is a non-profit, charitable organization providing child development and parent supports for children from prenatal to 11 years and their families. CHANCES, in partnership with the Margaret and Wallace McCain Foundation, completed a six-year research project (2012 – 2018) to document the impact of expanding access to a range of quality, integrated early childhood services focused on at-risk families.

The project's first phase centered on expanding and integrating early childhood and family support services. A core feature was 20 hours a week of no-fee preschool for children aging out of home visiting at age 3 until the start of Kindergarten at age 5. The second phase aimed to increase service quality by enriching the practice of educators and improving accountability through the development and use of assessment tools.

This report updates the interim findings released in 2016 that examined the impact of children's continuous participation in an Early Years Centre; the value of a focused learning agenda for early childhood educators and the potential for a data repository that would monitor the developmental trajectories of children from birth into the school system and beyond.

The Government of PEI facilitated the research. Processes, including improved access to Early Years Centres, have been scaled up. There are further opportunities to build on these made-in-PEI findings to enhance opportunities for the Island's children and families. Based on the findings, we recommend the following:

Improve Access

1. **Universal preschool for 4 year olds:** Canadian and international research documents the benefits of a minimum of two years of preschool programming prior to

Grade One to children's social, emotional and academic development. Preschool is also shown to provide economic and social benefits including reducing family poverty, promoting gender equality and stimulating economic development.¹ We recommend the Premier appoint a special advisor to develop an implementation plan for full day preschool for all 4 year olds that takes into account PEI's unique early childhood service structure and public education systems and facilitates alignment between early childhood programs and Kindergarten to better support children's transition to school.

2. **Revamp the child care subsidy application process:** Families, particularly the most vulnerable, find the requirements involved in applying for a fee subsidy both intimidating and stigmatizing. There are lessons to be learned from the practices CHANCES used to support the participation of vulnerable families that PEI could build on as it expands access to early years services.
3. **Include Early Years Centres in economic planning:** Early Years Centres provide economic stimulus as direct employers, as a workforce support and as consumers of local goods and services. Particularly when considering underserved areas, planners should recognize and incorporate the economic benefits of Early Years Centres.

Invest in the ECE Workforce

4. **Adopt a provincial early childhood workforce strategy:** PEI needs to provide compensation and professional learning opportunities for the ECE workforce that supports the recruitment and retention of qualified staff.

1 Alexander, C., Beckman, K., Macdonald, A., Renner, C. & Steward, M. (2017) Ready for Life: A Socio-Economic Analysis of Early Childhood Education and Care. Ottawa: Conference Board of Canada.

5. **Implement a quality improvement plan:** The Program Observation Tool and accompanying Program Standards are well-tested modalities to support educator practice. Both tools align with the provincial early learning framework and are available for adaptation and adoption across PEI's Early Years Centres.

Enhance Accountability

6. **Regularly assess program quality.** The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised is an internationally used external assessment of quality in early childhood settings. Its findings provide feedback to educators and operators about their practice and inform government and program decision-making. Importantly it provides assurances to parents of the quality of care their children receive.
7. **Develop coherent data gathering and monitoring systems:** There are opportunities to gather, store and extract service data to better inform decision-making. The emerging collaboration between University of PEI and Government of PEI to create a data-monitoring system requires ongoing support.

ACCESS

For children, participation in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs improves social, emotional and cognitive abilities that lead to improved academic performance, higher graduation rates, greater earnings and more successful relationships as adults. The children who benefit the most are those living in disadvantaged families and communities. For many families, ECE

CHANCES Network Of Early Childhood And Family Services

	2016	2019
Smart Start (Early Years Centres) capacity (0–4 years)	229	254
School-Age capacity (5–11 years)	221	400
Total Licensed capacity	450	787
Number of Early Years Centres (Smart Start)	5	9
Number of Smart Play (School age) programs		10
Best Start Home-visiting (numbers of children)	540	605

increases parents' participation in the labour force, reducing the draw on social benefits and increasing families' socio-economic circumstances.

CHANCES includes nine Early Years Centres, 11 before- and after-school programs and several family resource and parenting programs. It also operates Best Start, the provincial home-visiting program for low income and at-risk families with children from birth to age three years. CHANCES continues to expand access to early learning for children and resources and supports for families.

SMART START FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Approximately 100 children leaving Best Start home visiting were offered free access to 20 hours of early childhood education at a Smart Start Early Years Centre operated by CHANCES. The offer was made to families leaving Best Start who did not qualify for a child care fee subsidy. Government fee subsidies are only available to low-income families where the parents work or attend school full time. Fee subsidies may also cover child care costs for children under a child protection order.

A grant from the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation (MWMFF) covered the costs for 20 hours a week participation per child. Other than having participated in home visiting, no further financial or need assessment was required. If a parent found work or otherwise became eligible for a government subsidy, the child's attendance expanded to full time and the fee was no longer covered by the MWMFF grant.

All families offered free access to a Smart Start Early Years Centre accepted and most children participated continuously from the ages of two to three years until entry to Kindergarten.

- Fifty-four (54) children were fully supported by the MWMFF grant. Their families' status did not change during the period under study. Without free access through the MWMFF





grant, it is unlikely these children would attend any early learning program before Kindergarten.

- Twenty-six (26) children began attending Smart Start for 20 hours a week supported by the MWMFF grant. They switched to full-time attendance when their parents status changed and the family became eligible for a government fee subsidy. The children remained in the same centre with the same group of peers and educators. Their participation in Smart Start provided the parents with the time needed to search for work or pursued further studies.
- Twelve (12) children started in Best Start, supported by the MWMFF grant, switched to government fee subsidy for several months and then went back onto the MWMFF grant. These children also benefited from uninterrupted attendance in Best Start. Without the grant they likely would have cycled in and out of child care in tandem with their parents' precarious employment.
- Nine (9) children withdrew from Best Start before kindergarten due to the family's move out of the catchment or because of a child welfare apprehension.

CHANCES' interim Report in 2016 revealed the advantages of offering Smart Start to families whose children who were aging out of home visiting but were not eligible for a government fee subsidy. Children's improved language, social and thinking skills supported their entry to Kindergarten. Families readily took advantage of the offer and retention was not an issue.

When parents were asked about the benefits of their children's attendance in preschool for themselves, they responded:

- They were able to look for work and other job seeking activities (eg: working on resume)
- Spend time with friends
- Take care of home/clean/ look after younger children or other family members.
- Engage in self-care activities

In addition parents made use of other CHANCES programs including attending parenting classes

Comments from parents included:

"...as mothers we tend to put ourselves on the back burner, and that is not beneficial for any of us..."

"It really helped me get healthier, like mental wise, and it helped me with the relationship with the [children] too."

"(It has helped me) being in a routine with myself".

"It helps me at home, to help deal with them better, and how to work with different situations".

In 2018, the provincial government opened licensed child care **to** children leaving Best Start but the initial take up was low. While the eligibility rules had changed, families were still required to apply for a government fee subsidy. For some this proved too great a barrier. The CHANCES study identified the subsidy application process as an impediment to participation. It addressed the problem by having staff process any required applications. The province has since enhanced its outreach efforts and over 100 children are now attending **child care** under the program.

EXPANDED SMART START (EARLY YEARS CENTRES)

Since 2016, CHANCES opened three new Early Years Centres in the communities of O'Leary, Belfast and Spring Park without initial early years centre designation and funding. MWMFF supported the start-up period for O'Leary. At the time of writing, Belfast is still awaiting its designation.



ECONOMIC IMPACT IN O'LEARY, PEI

Early childhood education is a community economic driver. In 2016, CHANCES opened an Early Years Centre in O'Leary, a rural community in western PEI. It now accommodates 75 children (full-time and part-time) and employs 22 educators and support



staff. O'Leary employees frequent local businesses and services expanding the rural economy. The centre allows parents to pursue work and schooling. In a rural community such as O'Leary, the Early Years Centre provides significant economic and social benefits.

ACCESS TO CHANCES CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

In addition to early childhood education, CHANCES offers a suite of child and family resources and services, including parenting programs, early intervention and health services. 'In house' introductions and referrals support parent awareness of the full range of services CHANCES provides.

- Two thirds of the families who were in Best Start and then enrolled their child in Smart Start used one or more additional programs, resources or services offered by CHANCES
- Overall, 40 percent of families whose children attend Smart Start or Smart Play take part in another CHANCES program.

Parents who took part in a focus group in late 2018 remarked:

The baby was coming...we didn't know what we were going to do with (older child) the way that he was acting...hitting people...spitting on kids. We went crazy trying to find help and then all of a sudden, in one week we had eleven appointments with different things....

"CHANCES helps... it's a network".

QUALITY

The quality of ECE programs is tied to outcomes for children. While quality is influenced by multiple factors, the central active ingredient is the early childhood educator who shapes the children's social and physical experiences. Cultivating and maintaining a qualified, professional cadre of educators is challenging in an environment of low compensation and considerable com-

petition for qualified staff. CHANCES maintains its focus on the quality of programming in its Best Start Early Years Centres and other child and family services largely through its attention to the professionalism of its educators.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AGENDA

Professional learning is critical for increasing the educational quality and enhancing children's learning outcomes. Essential elements of professional learning include initial and continuing education. The majority of CHANCES educators have an ECE diploma and are encouraged to enrol in related undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Those who do not have ECE qualifications are supported to enrol part-time in the ECE diploma program at Holland College.

CHANCES has implemented an intentional professional learning agenda, recognizing that such efforts are most effective when they are ongoing and provide opportunities for continuous learning. CHANCES recognizes that ECE practice benefits from intentional opportunities that build pedagogical leadership, target the entire team, and encourage reflection among educators.

CHANCES has collaborated with the School of Early Childhood at George Brown College to develop pedagogical leadership capacity and improve practice. The collaboration has included a series of professional learning days for all CHANCES' staff; mentoring the CHANCES leadership team; and, attention to monitoring quality and documenting children's learning. This was complemented by expert presentations by Dr. Ted Melhuish, Oxford University, United Kingdom; June McLoughlin, Doveton Early Learning Centre, Melbourne, Australia; Dr. Christine McLean, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax; Dr Carl Corter and Dr Janette Pelletier from the University of Toronto and Dr. Stuart Shanker from MEHRIT, Ontario.

The professional learning agenda provided educators with opportunities to learn about emerging trends in early childhood





education. Educators reported feeling refreshed after professional learning events resulting in increased enthusiasm for their professional practice and confidence in their role.

PROGRAM OBSERVATION TOOL

The Program Observation Tool was designed by CHANCES educators guided by expertise offered through collaboration with George Brown College.

It aligns with the PEI Early Learning Framework and is used for continued quality improvement. The indicators are regularly reviewed by the educator team and revised to better reflect practices that best support the implementation of the provincial framework. CHANCES consolidated its experience in using the Program Observation Tool over three years into a statement of CHANCES Program Standards that are a concrete summary of practices to guide how centre directors and educators implement the early learning program.

CHANCES pedagogical leaders have presented the Program Observation Tool at national and regional conferences and discussed expanding its application to all PEI Early Years Centres with staff in the Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

ACCOUNTABILITY

MONITORING QUALITY

The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, Revised (ECERS-R) is an internally used tool designed to assess quality in early childhood settings. Trained observers rate the various interactions between children and adults as well as the interactions children have with the materials and activities in the classroom. Also considered are the space, schedule and materials that support these interactions.

CHANCES has continued to monitor the quality of its programs

and seek out opportunities to assess their impact on the lives of children and families. A comparison of 2016, 2017 and 2018 data at five of its Early Years Centres reveal a steady increase in quality as assessed by independent evaluators using the ECERS-R tool.

ECERS-R Trends In CHANCES Early Years Centres

	2016	2017	2018
St Jean	5.64	6.31	6.1
West Kent	5.0	6.07	6.13
Upper Prince	5.44	5.33	5.8
Ferry Road	5.74	6.55	6.66
Mason	4.6	5.8	6.17

TRACKING CHILD OUTCOMES NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

Individual service providers collect information on the types of people who use their services. Because the information is not linked across providers, it is not possible to form a global picture of who is using what services, when and for what purposes. Such information is important to service planning and assessment. For example child data at school entry are most useful when they can be linked to children's earlier and later experiences. PEI would benefit from a province-wide repository for the collection of existing data sets for research, policy and practice development and accountability purposes. Such repositories have long been used in other provinces for academic research and policy development.

CHANCES champions a province-wide data repository for PEI able to anonymously link individual data from birth into the school system and beyond. The MWMFF continues to support the work of researchers at UPEI towards this goal.

