

Three Communities to Showcase McGuinty Government's Best Start Plan

Helping Ontario Children Arrive At School Ready To Learn

QUEEN'S PARK, ON, March 11 /CNW/ - The McGuinty government has selected three Ontario communities to serve as models under the province's Best Start Plan that will provide more access to child care and early-learning opportunities for Ontario families, Minister of Children and Youth Services Marie Bountrogianni announced today.

The Best Start Plan involves a massive expansion of quality and affordable child care, beginning with four and five-year-olds, and investments in every child's healthy early development - all in a convenient and easily accessible location for parents.

"We are putting our Best Start vision into practice across Ontario," said Bountrogianni. "And we are providing additional resources to three communities to fast-track implementation so they can serve as models for the rest of the province."

The three communities are: the District of Timiskaming in northeastern Ontario, which has a large francophone community; the rural areas of Lambton and Kent in southwestern Ontario; and Hamilton's urban east end.

All three communities have a solid network of community agencies that are well-placed for rapid expansion of the Best Start vision, including:

- A rapid expansion of child care spaces for children in junior kindergarten and senior kindergarten
- A half-day learning program and child care spaces for two-and-a-half to four-year-olds
- Early and ongoing screening of newborns to identify needs and supports
- Early identification of specialized hearing and language needs
- A comprehensive 18-month well-baby checkup.

"Accelerating the Best Start Plan in these three communities will inform us and help us to meet the needs of all Ontarians, while ensuring we also meet the unique needs of families in northern Ontario and francophone families, as well as the challenges faced by both rural and urban families," said Bountrogianni.

Expert Panels to Guide Implementation

To help in the implementation of Best Start, the government is also establishing three expert panels. All three panels will report their findings over the next two years.

- The "Getting it Right at 18 Months Expert Panel" is developing strategies for a provincewide developmental assessment for every child in Ontario at 18 months of age.
- The expert panel on an early learning program will guide the development of learning strategies for preschool children that can link to the junior and senior kindergarten learning programs.
- The quality and human resources expert panel will look at recruitment and retention of early childhood educators, and ways to improve informal child care.

"For our children to reach their potential, we have to work together to ensure they get the best possible start in life," said Bountrogianni.

Backgrounder

THE McGUINTY GOVERNMENT'S BEST START PLAN

The McGuinty government's Best Start Plan involves a massive expansion of quality and affordable child care, beginning with four- and five-year-olds, and investments in every child's healthy early development - all in a convenient and easily accessible location for parents.

Across Ontario, community partners - school boards, public health units, child care and children's services providers, municipalities - will work with the province to develop and implement plans that will achieve the Best Start vision in ways that make sense to their local communities.

Best Start will provide many more families with easy, affordable access to services and supports, so that all Ontario children can arrive in Grade 1 healthy, ready and eager to learn.

More quality, affordable, accessible child care and early learning programs

- Rapid expansion of child care spaces for children in junior kindergarten and senior kindergarten, for a full day of learning and child care that includes high quality programs at the same location or nearby.
- A half-day learning program and child care spaces for children two-and-a-half to four-years-old.
- A new distribution of child care subsidies, based on income instead of means, that will make child care more affordable for more Ontario families.
- A new College of Early Childhood Educators to establish high

professional standards and ensure quality care - a quality and human resources expert panel is being established to look at recruitment and retention of early childhood educators, and ways to establish high quality licensed and informal child care.

- Strengthening connections between early learning and care and kindergarten communities - an expert panel on an early learning program is being established to guide the development of learning strategies for preschool children that can link to the junior and senior kindergarten learning program.

Investments in early healthy development

- Strengthening early screening for the estimated 130,000 infants born every year in Ontario to identify potential issues, needs and risks.
- Screening of all consenting mothers and newborns for developmental delays or risk factors at the hospital, followed by a phone call within 48 hours.
- Continued support for those who need extra help, including home visits and referrals to other support programs in their community.
- Strengthening hearing, speech and language programs to identify, treat and support children with a communication disorder - early identification is crucial for helping children develop strong language and literacy skills.
- Checkups for all children at 18 months, including vision screening - to help implement this initiative, the government has established a "Getting it Right at 18 Months Expert Panel" to develop strategies for a provincewide developmental assessment for every child in Ontario at 18 months of age.

Single point of access for families

- Establish community hubs that will pull together screening, assessment and treatment, child care and parenting programs, and will have direct links to other children's services such as mental health and speech and language resources.
- Services, hours and programming will be convenient for families and located centrally, ideally in an elementary school.
- In developing plans and delivering programs and services, communities will build on the strength and good work already being done across the province.