

## **New Brunswick Rural Child Care Strategy Sessions**

### **Summary Report**

**December 2005**

**Prepared by Rural Voices For Early Childhood Education and Care**

**Prepared for the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women**

### **1. Introduction**

If you live in rural New Brunswick, you know how hard it is to find and access services, whether it's services for children, families, youth, adults or seniors. Governments and community organizations struggle to successfully respond to the specific challenges of rural communities. These challenges include: large geographic distances, low population base, linguistic diversity, seasonal employment patterns and rural demographics.

Most children in New Brunswick are in some kind of non-parental care, since about three quarters of parents with young children are currently in the paid labour force. Even those parents who choose to stay at home with their children may need occasional flexible child care supports, whether to tend to their own personal needs, or the educational or social needs of their children. Regardless of parent status, the vast majority of children in this province are cared for in unlicensed and un-inspected settings. Quality, affordable and flexible child care has become an unreachable dream for most families, especially those living in rural communities.

These challenges, however, are not unique to New Brunswick. Our communities can look to other rural Canadian communities for examples and ideas to help New Brunswickers create our own solutions to meet the needs of rural families. To this end, the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women organized two community events to bring together community members interested in exploring child care opportunities in rural New Brunswick. The full day meetings, called Rural Child Care Strategy Sessions, occurred in Shédiac on December 5<sup>th</sup> and in Woodstock on December 6<sup>th</sup>. In total, 60 community members attended these two events with representatives including community parents, child care professionals, representatives of Local Service Districts, community organizations, social service professionals and representatives of municipal, provincial and federal governments.

The following report is a summary of the work and participation of this group. We present this information to you as a possible beginning of a process to engage all sectors of the community in partnership with all levels of government in working together to improve access to child care services and supports for New Brunswick's rural children and their families.

## 2. Goals of the Event

- explore a made in New Brunswick view of rural child care
- learn from the experience of other rural communities in Canada
- begin to increase community's capacity to inform the development of provincial child care policy and program

Both full day events began with a presentation on the Integrated Hub Model, a community development process that focuses on grassroots participation and ownership in local service development. Lessons learned from communities who have used this process to increase access to a variety of services for rural children and families include the importance of:

- starting from your own community base and defining where you want to go as a community
- challenging conventional views on how to deliver community services
- learning how to use all your community's resources including government policies and funding and
- figuring out how to fit the whole puzzle together in a way that treats communities and families as whole units instead of target groups or funding streams

The presentation then moved on to the topic of government public policy development and program design. The connection between public policy development at a government level and what services are available at the community level was discussed, as well as the challenges for government in creating child care public policy. The presentation lead to the conclusion that it is the community's responsibility to ensure that the development of child care policy and program design in New Brunswick responds to the needs of rural families and their children **NOT** that rural families and their children are forced to fit into provincial child care policy and program design.

The facilitators then shared a description of what child care services can be, and in fact do include, in other rural communities across Canada. The description included a broad range of services and supports for **all** parents to utilize. This continuum of services is much broader than the traditional urban view of child care as "centre based licensed day care services". Quality, regulation and accountability of public dollars were common threads throughout the service continuum. Through slides and videos the facilitators shared rural child care examples in Nova Scotia, Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario. A public education CD further illustrated program possibilities and articulated the vision of rural child care developed by citizens from every province and territory during a National Strategy Session for Rural Remote and Northern Child Care held in Ottawa in February 2005. Their national vision included the following declaration:

*"Our vision is that all children will enjoy a rich child-focused learning and care environment, which is available in their community and responsive to their needs and the needs of their community."*

*We concur with the intent of the QUAD principles announced by the federal government to guide the building of a new national program providing high quality, inclusive, universally accessible, affordable and developmental child care services that would:*

- *Recognize the right of all children to be safe, secure and supported to reach their full potential;*
- *Respond to the needs of children 0-12 years of age;*
- *Be inclusive of children with special needs;*
- *Respect linguistic and cultural diversity;*
- *Be organized so parents are able to work, study, care for family members, meet their own health and personal needs and participate in their communities;*
- *Validate the primary role of parents by encouraging them to be active participants in their children's learning;*
- *Link families in need to specialized services;*
- *Allow and promote flexibility and innovation in service delivery;*
- *Think beyond pilot projects to the sustainability of services;*
- *Address not only current needs, but plan for sustainable, growing communities which will keep and attract young people and encourage economic development;*
- *Encourage a stable child care workforce, supported by sustained public funding;*
- *Promote women's equality;*

(Participants of National Strategy Session for Rural Remote and Northern Childcare, February 2005)

### **3. Discussion**

The participants of the New Brunswick Rural Child Care Strategy Sessions then spent time discussing a vision for rural child care in their own province. Individual participants were asked to introduce themselves and tell the group their one “can’t live without” component in the development of rural child care services. This collection of issues was then grouped into theme areas and each theme area was then discussed further resulting in vision statements for the future. Each vision statement included implied values and a description of the impact moving towards each vision would have on children, parents and service providers. The issue areas over the two days included quality, accessibility, affordability, an expanded role for child care, a united voice, cultural diversity, inclusive services and a community voice. The following vision statements summarize the lengthy conversations regarding what participants felt were the most important issues in considering the development of rural child care services and supports in New Brunswick.

In 10 years we will have a universal model of quality child care which is community driven but has sustained funding from all levels of government.

The theme area for this discussion was affordability. The values identified in this group discussion included equality in access and opportunities for parents and children, sustainability and growth of communities and commitment of government money for child care services. The benefits for children would include better quality experiences in socialization and education and the support of different resources and experiences. Parents would benefit from increased access to spaces, transportation to services and more life opportunities for growth such as workshops and access to information. Service

providers would benefit from an increased level of quality education, more continuity of staff/child relationships, better resources to work with and more integration of child care into the broader community.

In 10 years we will have greater respect and awareness for workers in child care through improved wages, benefits and training: this will result in lower staff turnover and subsequently a greater retention of curriculum over time. This in turn will benefit children by allowing improvements in curriculum, learning and development and a more stable and structured environment for children with familiar caregivers.

The theme area for this discussion was quality. The values identified in this group discussion included community awareness, consistency of care, safety, recognition of staff, best practices and the best start for all children. The benefits for children, parents and service providers would include shared ideas, the addressing of low wages and high staff turnover, an increase in infant care and extended hour care, recognition of children's cognitive and physical development and respect for those working in the field. It was noted by this group that many trained professionals enjoy working in the field, but are forced to leave the field because they cannot afford to stay due to low pay.

In 10 years we will have community partnerships in place to support all children and families through community services, supports and networks.

The theme area for this discussion was inclusive service. The values identified in this group discussion included acceptance and understanding by all, lack of discrimination, overcoming the unknown and community acceptance of integration. The benefits for parents and children would be an increase in opportunities for the exchange of information, parents being seen as a resource of information regarding their child and their special needs, socialization of both children and their parents, increased family support networks and easier transition into school settings. For service providers, the benefits would include training of all professionals (not just Early Childhood Educators), more effectiveness in service delivery since both the community and services would be more organized and integrated, multi-disciplinary approaches that are low key and user friendly and a increased sense of community.

In 10 years we will have inclusive/universal community centres that provide services for families (from infants to grandparents).

The theme area for this discussion was an expanded role for child care focusing the conversation on school age children. The values identified in this group discussion included the importance of all children, everyone plays a role in ensuring children have access to a safe environment and that quality child care should be for all children. The benefits for children would include eliminating the responsibility of school age children to care for their younger siblings, increased opportunities for school age children to stay after school and participate in activities and the provision of safe environments for school age children. The benefits for parents would include access to services for school age children, help ensuring the safety of children, more flexibility to choose different jobs and different hours of work and a decrease in their stress level. The benefits to service

providers would include a decrease in criminal activity caused by unsupervised youth, more committed staff and a greater sense of community.

In 10 years we will have equal opportunities for community participation (voices) that do not depend on social status and that will empower a participatory approach to service development.

The theme area for this discussion was community voice. The values identified in this group discussion included cooperation, team work, team effort, shared responsibilities, collaboration, multi service focus and equal voices. The benefits for children, parents and service providers would include more support and opportunities, less stress, more ideas and thinking outside of the box, empowerment, equal opportunities, participation regardless of social status with nobody left behind.

In 10 years we will have child care workers with stable employment and programs who are respected as professionals, offering flexible child care options

The theme area for this discussion was quality. The values identified in this group discussion were child care professionals that have adequate quality resources and are valued for their work and the contribution they make to children's learning. The benefits for children would be continuity, the benefits for parents would be peace of mind and the benefits for service providers would include job security.

In 10 years we will have the creation of an organization that will unite the different individual organizations at the same table.

The theme area for this discussion was a united voice. The values identified in this group discussion were co-operation, collaboration, open communication, universality, and inclusiveness, respecting diversity and clarity and precision of the message. The benefits would be that a united voice would bring political and policy change, parents and community would have a better understanding of the importance of stability and continuity of services.

In 10 years we will have quality, flexible, affordable early learning and care available to meet the needs of children, families and the community.

The theme area for this discussion was accessibility. The values identified in this group discussion included knowledge of how to access services, central location for services, services that are culturally and linguistically responsive, stable and sustainable and meet the needs of communities, families and individual children. The benefits for children would be assisting them in reaching their full potential; benefits for parents would include peace of mind, confidence, choices and financial stability.

In 10 years we will have a universal child care program like health and education that responds to cultural diversity and participation.

The theme area for the discussion was affordability. The values identified in this group discussion included inclusive to all and fair to all. The benefits for children would be access to quality care regardless of parental financial status and the benefits for parents would include peace of mind and equal opportunity for the foundation years of all children.

It was very difficult for some participants to move beyond what they know occurs at a community level to a vision of what they would like to see in their own communities. Many spoke of provincial public policy that was not developed in consultation with community, rarely giving front line workers or parents the opportunity to discuss partnerships and future opportunities together as community. One participant spoke of the need for supports to help engage communities, to continue participatory processes such as this one and then to help communities mobilize around actions. The facilitators reminded the group that although they could tell them of many responsive programs and services developed in rural communities across Canada, their main goal was to share the details of a community process that would assist New Brunswick in creating rural child care options that make sense for their own rural communities. That process works best when it includes the support of all sectors of the community, including all levels of government services and political representation.

The visioning session was followed by group-work in Shédiac regarding what child care could look like in rural New Brunswick. The group-work in Woodstock looked more closely at quality in the delivery of community child care options. Participants answered the following questions in small groups and then reported back their finding to the entire group for discussion. The participation of the two group activities is summarized below.

What could Child Care look like in New Brunswick?
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Although participants certainly needed more time to respond to this question, participants suggested communities could use community centres to increase public awareness of services and supports, perhaps with the assistance of a community coordinator of services. This would create visible support in the community for parents, other professionals providing services to parents and to a variety of community caregivers. This community centre would respect parent's needs and give parents a voice to offer their opinions, suggestions and needs in services and supports. Services offered at this centre should be based on the social needs of the community.

One participant suggested that such a centre could offer one stop access to services for families, similar to what "Service New Brunswick" does for government services. Another group also suggested that child care services should operate in central locations in the community such as schools, recreation centres and community buildings. This was seen as a way to utilize school buildings that had empty usable space and/or assist in preventing rural schools from closing altogether. It was important to participants that community child care services were available even if you moved from one rural community to another.

Incentives to family day homes in the community were also suggested as a way to increase the availability home-based services. Pay incentives would assist in retaining trained Early Childhood Educators in the field. Whether home-based or centre-based, rural child care should offer flexible usage, community based partnerships and extended hours of care to respond to the needs of community parents. Service delivery should focus on community need and should start by stabilizing existing services and sharing information on the services and supports that are available now in the community.

How do you define quality relating to rural child care?

Participants suggested small ratios, safety indicators, qualified staff, curriculum variety, age appropriate programming, nurturing environments, and structured policies and procedures defined quality. Beyond these concrete indicators, participants felt quality was also tied to fairness and equality in access to services, accessibility to flexible hours and transportation to programs and the development of specific supports such as start up funding. Participants also talked about quality being defined by the staff's ability to communicate with parents and their the ability to create policy that meets the needs of the community. It was suggested that quality was based on more than just standards and that governments should work more closely with community to define quality. An example of this was community-based quality control of curriculum. At the present time the government is creating a standard curriculum for the early years for use by both parents and caregivers across the province.

How do we ensure quality now in rural child care?

Now quality is insured through requirements for trained professionals in programs, the licensing process and legislation regarding the delivery of licensed care. For the unlicensed system participants felt quality was ensured by word of mouth and/or a "hope and a prayer". Some spoke of efforts to encourage unlicensed providers to become licensed and the present practice of responding to reports from citizens regarding unsafe unlicensed care in the community.

Participants also recognized government funding for wages, professional development, distance education opportunities and improved resources (Quality Improvement Funding Support program, Department of Family & Community Services) as ways the government is working towards ensuring quality child care services.

Participants from the Family Resource sector also said that resource centres in the province offer parent education on finding quality child care, something many other participants were unaware of. As well, Public Health in the province distributes some information during 3 \_ year clinics regarding hints for looking for quality child care.

How could we improve quality in the future for rural child care?

Participants felt that the expansion of programs that teach parents how to choose quality child care choices would be one important way of improving the quality of rural child

care in the future. If parents were more able to recognize quality programs, they would be more able to demand quality for their children. Ideas also included the development of a support network for home based providers (licensed and unlicensed) and the renewal of distance education training opportunities for child care staff beyond May 2006.

Discussion also ensued regarding new ways to approach training for child care staff in rural areas including mobile training opportunities that would go to each facility. Such supports would not only increase training in the field, but could be used to evaluate programs and respond to identified areas of need. It was noted however; that this type of support should be available to all programs in all communities and not just a selected few. Some participants felt that the heart of the matter was a need for Early Childhood Educator's to change their mindset and think of themselves more as professionals. Although the majority of the group agreed, many felt this was very difficult to do in the present environment. All agreed that Early Childhood Educations lack recognition for their contribution to the early education of the provinces youngest citizens.

Participants also talked about involving all sectors of the community (community members, government, business, etc..) in partnership, working together to improve the quality of child care services. For this to happen, government must assume clear responsibility for children aged 1-5 with a focus on service delivery whether in a private or non-profit setting. Government should provide resources and education to mobilize the community around quality child care services and all parties should recognize that the process would not happen overnight. For a little investment of government funds, the resulting community partnerships and effort could bring a lot of return for the investment. This was one way that participants felt government could support communities role and partnership in developing both child care public policy and responding community programs. It was also seen as important for government to consider funding opportunities that were not tied so tightly to specific criteria, but to specific outcomes, giving some flexibility at a community level in how those outcomes would be met. And finally, participants recognized the need for consistent curriculum development and felt that quality would improve if the government ensured dissemination of curriculum information to all parents and caregivers in all communities.

### **3. Summary**

New Brunswick is a province with a large percentage of citizens living in rural areas and communities. Rural communities in this province face many challenges in service

delivery, however, some of these challenges are similar to those faced by other rural communities across this nation. It was important to participants attending these events to hear the similarities in service delivery challenges in other rural communities, and to become aware of some of the solutions used to overcome these challenges. Like most jurisdictions, however, specific elements of New Brunswick life make it necessary to develop a made in New Brunswick solution to rural child care, and this was the main focus of these events. The following is a summary of the key messages resonating from the discussions of both the Shédiac and Woodstock strategy sessions – messages that are important for government and all other sectors of the community to hear.

### **Community is up to the Challenge!**

- Community wants consultation and believes that they have something to contribute to the process of policy development.
- Participants enjoyed being engaged in the process of looking at the development of rural child care services and supports.
- Participants are ready and willing to take this process further in their communities and across the province.
- Some government support is necessary to assist in engaging communities, continuing this participatory process and mobilizing communities around actions.

### **Quality Matters**

- Quality of programs and supports is a concern for parents, child care providers, and other professionals in the community and government representatives regardless of what type of child care service was being used.
- Issues of poverty and poor statistical results for children, families and services makes quality measures critical in ensuring the best start for rural New Brunswick children.
- Lack of recognition of the important role child care providers and staff play in the early years.

### **More resources and better use of resources**

- More government funding should go to quality, affordability, accessibility, inclusiveness, sustainability and community participation in the development of rural child care services and supports.
- Community needs to understand the resources presently in their community and how to partner and work together with government to create positive changes and increase access to services for rural children and their families.

### **Rural can have programs too!**

- Just because we live in rural New Brunswick does not mean we do not deserve or cannot have quality child care services and supports.
- Flexible delivery models and extended care are necessary to meet the needs of rural New Brunswick's working parents as well as stay at home parents who are often isolated and in need of supports.

- School age children are lost in the struggle to access child care options, often becoming caregivers themselves for their younger siblings.

Participants of both sessions worked hard at summarizing the array of individual views and ideas in each small group session. Small groups reported back to all participants after each small group discussion. This allowed further discussion of the main messages presented by each small group of participants. The ability to stay on task and to maintain a significant level of energy throughout the day was a testament to participants interest in the issue of rural child care and their ability to meaningfully contribute to the identification of service delivery issues and the creation of community solutions. On evaluation forms, participants were asked to list one action that they could do immediately do to ensure that the community work accomplished today continues beyond this event. The list of actions was impressive ranging from “creating a focus group in my own community” to “start a networking group to “looking at the feasibility to establish a day care in our community centre”. The number and diversity of participant’s answers illustrates clearly the multitude of ways that community members can be involved in the development of responsive rural services and supports.

It is recognized that these community events are only the beginning of a process to engage the broader community in the design of a “made in New Brunswick” response to the child care challenges of it’s rural families and children. Government and community must move quickly to not lose the momentum created through these two rural events. Time is of the essence.

#### **4. Recommendations**

**In partnership with community members, service providers, organizations, institutions and local government, we recommend that the government of New Brunswick:**

- 1. Facilitate and development ways to improve access to information regarding the services presently available to rural families and their children (comparable to a Services New Brunswick for parents).**
- 2. Explore “asset mapping techniques” in rural communities to clearly document present resources and services available to rural families and their children.**
- 3. Explore, in partnership with Local Service Districts, Municipalities and the Department of Education, the use of community buildings such as schools and community centres as sites for rural child care services and supports.**
- 4. Respond to the immediate need for school age child care by exploring before and after school services, possibly in conjunction with the exploration of full day programs for 4 year olds.**
- 5. Improve the level and quality of community consultation on provincial initiatives and potential policy directions affecting rural citizens including the exploration of full day programs for 4 year olds.**
- 6. Explore ways to fund and support community partnership building, mobilization and integration of services in rural areas as a sound investment in developing solutions to the challenges faced by rural communities in accessing services.**
- 7. Increase funding to improve the training and retention of Early Childhood Educators in the field to improve the quality and stability of regulated child care services and supports.**
- 8. Explore incentives for quality home based child care and other innovative quality models of care for young children in rural communities.**
- 9. Recognize the challenges in rural communities and their vision of quality, affordable, accessible, flexible, inclusive, integrated child care services and supports that includes, but is not limited to, licensed centre based day care services.**
- 10. End the divisive approach that the government is taking regarding stay at home parents versus working parents in this province, and focus instead on developing a vision of services and supports that responds to the diverse and flexible needs of all community parents including those living in rural areas.**