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Full day learning in Ontario:
A Foundation's Influence on Public Policy

Beginning in September 2010, Ontario will become the first jurisdiction in North America to provide a publicly-funded and operated learning and care program for four and five year olds.

The new Early Learning Program (ELP) operates from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. There is no cost to parents for the regular school day with an affordable fee charged for extended hours. This is not full day kindergarten with wrap around child care. The ELP is a new program, taught by a qualified team of educators using the same play-based curriculum and resources.

The model represents a breakthrough in the delivery of early childhood services and is designed to lead a revolution in program provision for children from infancy through to adolescence.

The blueprint for change is detailed in a government commissioned report ***With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing early learning in Ontario*** (http://www.ontario.ca/en/initiatives/early_learning/ONT06_018865) by Dr. Charles Pascal, Executive Director of the Atkinson Charitable Foundation (ACF).

The Pascal report is unique among the flood of studies on early human development that have surfaced over the past decade. It is not focused on *why* early childhood development should be an economic and social priority rather it outlines *how* to effectively couple new public investments with existing resources to maximize results for children, families and communities.

The back-story to report and the Ontario government's culminating announcement is the innovative leveraging by a medium-sized Canadian foundation that decided on a goal and stuck to it. The cornerstone of the lessons learned from the Atkinson Charitable Foundation's decade-long journey to turn scientific evidence into community action and ultimately public policy begins with the simple but compelling assumption that ultimately, it is only through public

policy that permanent and sustainable changes for a better future can take place.

With this in mind, the ACF plays several roles and uses various vehicles to focus its efforts and inform its actions, including:

1. CONVENING:

Taking a step back, Ontario's initiative may not have emerged without the groundbreaking conversation-changer brought about by the 1999 Early Years Study (McCain & Mustard, 1999).

Atkinson convened of a key group of stakeholders and experts with an interest in seeing advances on early learning and child care, but there were differences that had to be negotiated to clarify the 'ask'. A key outcome was agreement around the need to integrate education and childcare as a policy direction.

Partly thanks to the Foundation's neutrality, partly due to the credibility of the Foundation and its staff, and definitely because of the goodwill of the advocates, policy thinkers and academics around the table, what became known as Toronto First Duty (TFD) emerged -- school-based, community-influenced sites intended to demonstrate the child development and parenting centres described in the Early Years Study.

Working in its own name with its school board, municipal and community partners, the Foundation specialized in researching and communicating the new model and its advantages.

TFD gave policymakers and influencers a place to "touch and feel" the difference between conventional, siloed children's service delivery and an integrated and comprehensive format. Parents got to experience an integrated program; politicians, practitioners and experts from far and wide came to see what the future could look like. This helped boost government confidence allowing it to commit to early learning and child care expansion and reorganization in two consecutive election platforms.

Documenting and championing good practice influenced public policy. Throughout the process Atkinson provided a neutral space for stakeholders to organize their thinking and strategy. It is a powerful example of how effective foundations "roll up their sleeves" and get involved beyond traditional funding roles.

2. NIMBLE FUNDING:

The Ontario Liberals' 2007 election platform promised an expert to advise them on the best way to implement a universal full day early learning program in the province. Charles Pascal was named.

His part time government secondment took Charles away from the direct oversight of the Foundation's early years file but the time and resources the Foundation had invested in attracting and sustaining staff and outside expertise and building networks allowed the work to proceed without interruption. To maintain the integrity of the work the Board established a "fire wall" between Charles' assignment for the Premier and the Foundation's interest in continuing its own work independently.

The Foundation knew it needed to create the space for the government to welcome and adopt the Pascal report. The next 12 months would require a "campaign-like readiness" for public education that would need to be strategic, focused and nimble... the foundation also knew that if it was going to ask its grassroots partners to focus all their efforts on the report and its success, it had to back them..

One of the decisions made by the ACF board was to establish an "Early years fund" that could be tapped for targeted, strategic, time-sensitive initiatives between quarterly board meetings. The fund could be topped up as needed, and a quick-turn-around process was established to ensure its partners could always count on the resources needed to stay ahead of the curve with newswire posts; support for meetings; polling; quick research pieces; etc.

3. EVIDENCE BASED POLITICS OF CHANGE

Another dimension of the early learning story was how Atkinson invested in building solid research and policy responses as part of their effort to realize change in Ontario. The Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development leads the research for Toronto First Duty and continues to contribute to the implementation of full day learning by undertaking timely studies, convening expert gatherings and facilitating information sharing.

The Foundation has resourced other innovative research including an about to be released cost-benefit study on comprehensive early childhood service funding. From this work the government can both build a case for the need to change as well as point to concrete recommendations for how to do it.

4. POWER BROKERING

Funders have ideas, resources, connections, leadership and pretty good inroads with decision makers. This is why funders are in the distinct position of playing bridge-builders between the community and policy makers. One of the unique roles that Atkinson played in the development of the early learning program was to help broker relationships between early childhood authorities and those who create policy change at the political level. For instance, Atkinson drew on the world-class expertise of its networks to both support the development of the Pascal report and to inform and prepare policy makers for its final recommendations.

Another example is the role the Foundation continues to play in shaping the implementation of full day learning, by supporting community groups to understand and influence the process, by aiding the government with information and resources and by bringing implementation concerns – and solutions - to the government's attention. In many ways, convening and brokering activities are the Foundation's most cost-effective methods in bringing about change.

4. DIVERSIFICATION

Just as good investors know the value of a diversified portfolio, foundations have done well to invest in a range of strategies geared to common objectives. Atkinson continues to invest in range of approaches to address access to early learning from multi-year research and resource development, issue-specific campaigns, commissioning studies, popular opinion pieces and journal articles, identifying and promoting new voices for early learning and sponsoring symposiums and other information sharing platforms.

A recent example is the “Brainstorm” series that appeared in the Toronto Star. This innovative work by an Atkinson-sponsored journalism fellow calls on policy makers and educators to adapt education practices to the new knowledge about brain development. Another very practical example is its work with the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, the support group for local human service managers, to develop model service plans to inform systems managers on best practice in implementing full day learning.

Overall the work of ACF has fostered a remarkable convergence of stakeholder and public opinion in support of the transformational approach to early childhood and family service delivery.

5. COMMUNICATIONS, COMMUNICATIONS

In some ways, the ACF is a communications organization ensuring that good ideas, founded on solid evidence and experimentation are well-communicated to the public and the decision-makers at all levels. A strong emphasis is placed on multi-faceted “evidence-based story-telling” that takes many print, electronic, and face-to-face forms.

6. FUNDER COLLABORATION

Funders did work together informally to advance an early learning strategy for Ontario. Numerous efforts were made to lever each others' resources to ensure promising initiatives were realized, conversations were had, and people connected up.

The Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation champions the Pascal report as the blueprint for the country. MWMFF chair Margaret McCain continues to promote Toronto First Duty to national and international audiences and has lent her name and influence to a number of efforts supporting the Pascal report including co-authoring opinion pieces, sponsoring open letters, hosting meeting with officials, and is exploring co-operative initiatives to promote the directions outlined in the report

The Atkinson Charitable Foundation model informs the work MWMFF. We intend to draw on its proven success of activist, focused and supportive funding partnerships to realize mutual goals.
