

Hamilton's Best Start Network

Caledon's 'community snapshots' present brief overviews of promising new initiatives founded by Vibrant Communities and other community-focused organizations.

Background

The Ontario Ministry of Child and Youth Services (MCYS) was created in 2003 to help families find and access the services they needed to give their children a good start in life, succeed in the education system and become productive adults. The Ministry's "Best Start" initiative focuses on early learning and child care services and healthy child development from birth to Grade 1. Best Start is funded through community partners to ensure a seamless network of services and supports. The initiative operates at Early Learning Hubs which are located throughout participating communities.

In 2005, Hamilton was selected as one of three demonstration sites for the implementation of Best Start. This meant that Hamilton would accelerate the introduction of the program components and share learnings from its experiences with the rest of the province. The core components of Best Start include the expansion of quality child care and Early Learning Hubs and the stronger integration of early years services. To ensure a smooth transition to Best Start programming, a decision was made not to rename existing MCYS-operated Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYCs) as Early Learning Hubs. OEYCs have existed in Hamilton since 2002 and their mandate is similar to that of the Best Start hubs.

Strategy

In implementing Best Start in Hamilton, the community is building on existing community strengths. Plans for child care expansion, for example, had been driven by a well-connected child care community. To further strengthen the Best Start implementation effort, the Hamilton Best Start Network (BSN) was founded in the spring of 2005. The network also committed to raising awareness about the importance of the early years throughout the community.

Recently celebrating its second anniversary, BSN currently has more than 50 members. Participants come from public health, the four local school boards, child care and OEYC operators, child health and research specialists from McMaster's Children's Hospital, preschool speech and language professionals, child advocates, Mohawk College (where early childhood educators are trained), police and other less traditional community members. The network has become the centralized point where people can talk about early learning. Rather than make operational decisions, they share information in high-level conversations; individual organizations then determine how to structure and carry out their mandates in harmony with network goals.

The Best Start Network also has made specific links to the emerging Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR). BSN members recognized that awareness of poverty needed to be embedded into Best Start activities in Hamilton. While Best Start is a universal program for all preschool-aged children and their families, the link to HRPR has led to greater emphasis on increasing the number of Ontario Early Years Centres in low-income neighbourhoods.

Outcomes

The network's greatest achievement is the articulation of a far-reaching community vision for Best Start in Hamilton. BSN members are clear that their work is about children, families, the community and the future, which allows latitude for linking their efforts to economic development activities and the formulation of long-term poverty solutions. The original notion that Best Start involves services to help children function well in Grade 1 has been broadened to mean that Best Start is for everyone – individual and specific mandates are aligned with this common understanding. A recent private donation of \$1 million for early learning was made in respect of what Hamilton wants to do in the area of child care and in direct response to the frustration that the federal government had stopped its early years transfer to communities after the last federal election.

Since 2005, the province of Ontario has invested nearly \$30 million for Best Start in Hamilton. Since then, BSN has achieved a rapid expansion of child care spaces – 1,100 new spaces in all, many of them subsidized. The network has added to the city's existing OEYCs by opening seven new ones, five of which are located in schools. These new facilities will also provide services to meet the particular needs of the Aboriginal and French communities.

The Best Start Network has developed innovative approaches to work with other sectors. For example, a primary care engagement project has built awareness of the importance of the 18-month well-baby visit among family physicians. The project will work closely with family physicians and their staff to increase awareness and use of the Nipissing District Developmental Screen and the Rourke Baby Record. As information is shared, it is expected that doctors will make more referrals to OEYCs. To ensure that this happens, OEYCs have established a single telephone number which allows callers to be connected to the centre best suited to their needs.

By making services more community based, BSN has succeeded in reducing some wait times for early intervention programs. Federal and provincial funding for particular services has assisted this work. As professionals become better organized, the goal of wrapping services around neighbourhoods in a team approach is becoming a reality. The engagement of BSN members helps people to talk about bringing together key services – public health, speech pathology, literacy specialists and others – to meet the needs of children and families in schools or the community. The sharing of resources and decision-making among the collaborative rather than individual agencies helps promote the equitable development of services. BSN’s link with the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction provides the connections required to expand opportunities for service in low-income neighbourhoods.

Over the next year, Hamilton’s Best Start Network will continue to improve service integration. Neighbourhood support service teams will be established and operate in a coordinated fashion. BSN will work with the Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion to ensure that programs are welcoming to the community’s diverse population. The coming year will also be a time to share the lessons of Hamilton’s Best Start implementation.

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