



**ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS
FIRST NATIONS TECHNICAL WORKING GROUP ON
HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT**

**National Meeting on Indigenous Early Learning and
Child Care Framework**

July 12, 2017 | Toronto, Ontario

SUMMARY REPORT

August 20, 2017 – Draft for Review and Input



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ABOUT THE ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS

The AFN is the national, political organization comprising First Nations governments and their citizens in Canada, including those living on reserve and in urban and rural areas. Every Chief in Canada is entitled to be a member of the Assembly. The National Chief is elected by the Chiefs in Canada, who in turn are elected by their citizens.

In addition to many other functions, the AFN facilitates consideration for means to address national policy issues raised among the over 630 First Nations across Canada. The role and function of the AFN is to serve as a national delegated forum for determining and harmonizing effective collective and co-operative measures on the priorities identified by First Nations.

Under the leadership of National Chief and the AFN Executive Committee, who oversee targeted portfolios, organizational activity has included advancing Aboriginal and Treaty Rights, economic development, employment and training, education, and array of issues that are relative to advancing First Nations economic infrastructure and labour force development interests.

Introduction

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) hosted a First Nations Technical Working Group on Human Resources Development National Meeting to consider the work currently underway on the development of a National Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Framework. Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) and Indigenous and Northern Affairs (INAC) are collaborating with Indigenous Peoples, provinces, and territories in developing a National Early Learning and Child Care Framework focused on affordable, high-quality, flexible and fully inclusive child care. A dedicated Indigenous ELCC Framework is being pursued on a separate track from the Federal-Provincial/Territorial ELCC Framework.

The following points capture the key messages from First Nations Aboriginal Skills Employment and Training Strategy (ASETS) representatives and some of their child care experts who attended a facilitated one-day meeting in Toronto, Ontario on July 12, 2017.

Developing an Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Framework – The Role of First Nations/Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI)

The First Nations/Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI) has been in place since 1995 and under the management of the ASETS agreement holders since 1998. FNICCI provides agreement holders the authority to develop local child care programs that can include daycares, day homes or individual client solutions. There are significant differences in each region (province or territory) as to the manner in which FNICCI has evolved largely due to the influence of provincial child care practices and legislation.

ASETS Agreement holders across Canada manage the FNICCI envelope in their respective labour market areas. With a history spanning twenty years, agreement holders have developed a valuable community child care presence in most First Nations.

It is important to recognize that ASETS is a mature structure that works directly with all First Nations communities in Canada through special organizations (agreement holders) that operate with stakeholder-based planning and decision-making protocols. Agreement holders range in size and have specific labour markets to serve.

Generally, facility-based child care programs in First Nations across Canada would not exist to any appreciable degree without the past investment levels of the First Nations Indian/Inuit Child Care Initiative. However, while the FNICCI is a necessary foundation for these programs, there is considerable evidence that it is not sufficient to create the level of access, support and impact that could be achieved. Frankly, these programs have survived in spite of predictable environmental challenges and funding limitations.



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A key environmental challenge is matching available resources with demand. Communities that have centers have sufficient spaces to support approximately 1 out of 5 local pre-school children. With regulated allotments for infants, toddlers and pre-school, centers have to follow local policies to accept children given capacity limitations (space, staff, financial). The prevalence of special needs children requiring unique staff support magnifies the challenges in meeting local needs.

FNICCI funding is not based on actual cost needs but is a “subsidy” currently being managed on a \$6500 per space in all agreements. Centers that establish parental fees can expand their budgets at the cost of excluding families who cannot afford the fees. In some cases, fees are covered by other active measure programs in the community. End-of-year deficits often are absorbed by band operations.

Unpredictable financial needs for repairs and renovations, special needs programming, and resource replacements are typically stalled without access to supplemental resources.

The agreement holders who participated in the one-day discussion noted that the event was a last minute involvement in a process that, as designed, had not resulted in any significant inclusion to date. Some concern regarding the lack of ESDC leadership was noted. Some observations that the ELCC programs were in silos at all levels (federal departments, regional offices, and First Nations organizations) implied that thorough engagement required that all silos needed to be formally consulted. It was noted that regional representatives invited participants in each region apparently without a common engagement strategy.

Regardless, the following messages summarize the main points:

1. **Responsive Programming.** Each agreement holder supports, as a goal, a holistic approach to child care programming which reflects local language and cultural learning within professional early learning and care environments. Participants particularly noted the value of land-based learning where it was occurring. The degree to which actual programs achieve desirable levels of such programming is primarily based on supplementary local resources. While program authorities allow for multi-faceted early learning design incorporating specific cultural (including language) components, the limited resources do not allow for a complete program. The existence of “shoestring programming” is not by choice. In the words of one participant – “We need more funds to do what we need to do”.
2. **Openness to Change.** Agreement Holders are positively protective of the real benefits that FNICCI sites provide in their communities. However, a host of long-standing deficiencies in the current initiative could be addressed by a robust indigenous ELCC framework. The engagement materials and presentation were very open-ended and made it difficult for the group to respond. ASETS agreement holders competently fulfill the administrative requirements for FNICCI as laid out in their contribution agreements and companion guidelines. They are generally not familiar with the types of ELCC agreements in the other two departments and, as a result, could not comment on specific benefits or challenges.

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3. **Long-term Agreements.** FNICCI has been a tentative part of the ASETS program and service menu during most program renewal cycles. There is a firm desire to firmly embed FNICCI in a revamped 10-year agreement. Previous contribution agreement language has included a wind-down clause for the FNICCI component (not the current version). Previous engagement discussions during program renewal have been silent on the continuation of FNICCI and, therefore, have not collected any feedback to inform program enhancements.
4. **Regional Models.** While FNICCI is a national initiative, its evolution as a regulated program has resulted in significant regional variations as a result of several types of influences including First Nations frameworks, provincial/territorial policies, certifications of staff qualifications, complementary provincial and federal programming, etc. Any proposed changes or enhancements within an ELCC framework will need to be tested against these regional models. The agreement holders were very aware of complementary early learning programs in their respective regions but each region had its own name for what appeared to be very closely related initiatives. There appears to be different guidance regarding the program from Service Canada in the different parts of the country as well. A national approach will really be the collection of regional models.
5. **Access.** There are gaps and space limitations in the FNICCI delivery system across Canada primarily due to resource limitations. A new ELCC framework should prioritize a child care strategy in all First Nation communities with capacity at a comparable scale (proportion of pre-school children in the community) driving these strategies. One agreement holder in BC noted that there were 6 daycares in their area out of 15 First Nations. A new look at child care solutions could examine the role of day homes (see point 8). The design of a new capacity benchmark is an obvious early item of business in a new framework. The identification of gaps in delivery is also an early piece of research to undertake.
6. **Remedial funding.** The original resource allocation for FNICCI was based on a custom allocation model (Halifax formula) which made specific modifications for two regions – Ontario and Alberta. Both of these regions see the current funding structure as severely deficient. A new ELCC framework should directly measure and address this problem. The Assembly of First Nations has passed specific resolutions regarding this issue.
7. **Zero-based budgeting.** The current level of resources for each child care space is seen to be arbitrary and significantly less than the real costs of a quality program. There is an obvious need to create real world budgets for child care programs that include all costs such as competitive staff salaries, elder costs, special needs allowances, specialized language/cultural programming, northern/remote allowances, etc. Many daycares are unable to operate for extended hours to accommodate commuting workers or those that work outside the normal hours. Some participants noted a basic need for good educational toys and more culturally appropriate toys. FNICCI should not be seen as a subsidy program but as a fully-costed initiative. Consideration of second-level support capacity, on-going professional development, access to professional diagnostic services, facility repair/construction plans would be part of a broader regional budget.



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8. **Community fit.** Child care centers are guided by industry standards, trained child care staff and community needs. In this context, community leadership needs to accommodate and support the centers as a unique program environment where the health and safety of children is paramount. Most successful centers have informed, supportive local governments. Several participants commented on the ad hoc solutions adopted by communities with limited child care spaces. This is an area where information sharing could have a substantial impact. One participant from Alberta asked “why is it that nations (First Nations) are not allowed to have day homes?” while another from Manitoba observed that their nation is “encouraged to start day homes”. Agreement holders clearly have long-standing working relationships with their host communities and are in a position to guide planning for an expansion of the program in a manner that ‘fits’ the community.
9. **Safe Spaces.** The built-up infrastructure in most communities seldom has available buildings suitable for child care programming which has specific space guidelines for infant, toddlers and pre-school children. Temporary facility compromises have led to semi-permanent operations due to inadequate community resources and, typically, a very distant hope of capital funding for extensive renovations or replacement structures. It is unfortunate to hear comments like ‘one daycare has mold for the last fifteen years’ and ‘one daycare supplementing their heat with (high cost) electric heaters’ and a call for spaces where ‘the roof is not going to cave in, there are no holes in ramps and there are adequate fences for wildlife’. While these are obvious exceptions, the real issue is that they are not capable of a solution with planning and resources. Recent supplemental investments by ESDC have sought to address many condition issues in many communities. There are differing points of view whether child care programs should be co-located within schools. One viewpoint is that schools tend to think it is their program which is not a good idea as young children under the age of 8 learn best through play-based methods. Schools tend to push more academic methods.
10. **Child Care Workforce.** Child care practitioners are part of a well-defined area of practice with each region having their own certification pathways. Every discussion regarding challenges to FNICCI includes difficulties in retaining staff that are underpaid. Comments such as “In our province, daycare workers are making less than the janitors” describe the problem well. One participant noted that it is way past due to compensate elders for their time because they are teachers when they are in the daycare. Part of this would be to have a process to certify or accredit their expertise. It is a fact of life that the daycare workers are dealing with special needs (regardless of the lack of access to diagnostic services) and any specialized training is valued although probably inadequate. Several agreement holders profiled the approach to staff training that is working for them. On a broader scale, workers must educate the community that daycares are not just babysitting centres but are an important early learning environment that can help overcome “a history of trauma, residential school effects, families and parents who are overwhelmed with special needs, autism, FASD and other issues”.

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11. **National FNICCI Working Group.** Agreement holders want their child care experts to participate in a national working group that can promote overall development of quality programming through informational-sharing, advocacy and joint planning. With a permanent national process within First Nations infrastructure there will be a place for Canada to vet ELCC issues, there will be ongoing liaison, the sharing of best practices and a renewed focus on indigenous early learning.
12. **Flexibility.** ASETS managers expect greater flexibility to address operational issues unique to First Nations within the FNICCI environment. An example put forward concerned a daycare located on an island where supplies were brought in by boat and the ASETS manager needed to approve the purchase of an ATV to transport supplies but ran up against inflexible rules. Many ASETS organizations support FNICCI programs without any administrative levies in order to maximize spending in the community. There are still negative comments regarding the removal of eligibility of nutritional program costs for a period of time in the past. This was an unintended consequence of an overall tightening of food/hospitality spending but could have been avoided if a vetting process was in place at the time. The terms and conditions of FNICCI should be re-visited to modernize the program framework.
13. **Receptivity to align programs.** There is a general sense of receptivity to align other programs with FNICCI based on a region-by-region approach. In many cases First Nations or Tribal Councils already manage multiple ELCC programs and are interested in streamlined reporting although experience has shown that streamlining results in increased reporting for some programs. It was noted that half of the centres in Nova Scotia were joint with Headstart with each program reporting separately. Several participants noted that FNICCI reporting was less onerous. ASETS organizations are typically in closer contact with communities and are in a better position to integrate programs serving common population groups. One participant noted that “when I ask the communities they are not aware of this process – they like the fact we are there delivering, the issue of the burden of reporting – not that onerous. I am not sure of who will benefit from consolidating these programs”.



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Conclusion

FNICCI is now a permanent part of First Nations and can be linked directly to overall growth and development. There are obvious linkages to individual family impacts and to broader community effects.

It was noted that in a daycare where children were learning their first language there was a noticeable change in the energy. That daycare was in an old residential school where children were previously abused for speaking their language. This was seen as a best practice that turns reconciliation into 'reconciliation'.

It was noted that child care is an intricate part of an economic development strategy that, if aligned with the business lines of the First Nation, allows projects to go forward and parents to participate in those opportunities.

The need to align and consolidate ELCC programming is not coming from FNICCI communities however there must be a recognition of regional differences and processes. The need to address deficiencies is quite obvious and long-standing. An indigenous ELCC framework that prioritizes an empowered FNICCI program will be able to produce substantial benefits practically immediately because the ASETS framework is already in place and working.



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