

## **BRIEFING NOTE (for information)**

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**Topic:** StrongStart: the importance of program integration and staff development

**For:** K-12 locals and staff with K-12 assignments

**By:** John Malcolmson, research representative (CUPE, BC Region)

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The provincial Ministry of Education (MOE) maintains a number of program initiatives targeting early childhood education for the 0-5 age group. Programming in this area is guided by its *Early Learning Framework*, a policy document released in 2007. To date, the central program initiative guided by this policy has been StrongStart.

StrongStart was initiated in 2006/07 as a 16 location pilot utilizing vacant school space for the provision of community outreach early learning programs aimed at enhancing “school readiness” for children in the 0-5 age group. Since that time the program has grown rapidly. According to MOE statistics, StrongStart expanded from the original pilot locations to about 60 programs in 2007/08 and 202 programs in 2008/09. In 2009-10, several more sites have been added around the province bringing the current total to over 300 programs. Suffice it to say that StrongStart has grown rapidly from its early days as an experimental initiative geared to facilitating positive school entry and learning experiences to its current status as a focal point of Ministry early childhood education across all regions of the province.

### **StrongStart evaluation**

The StrongStart pilot was evaluated by the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) program at UBC. In late 2007, HELP released its preliminary report followed by a final report in the fall of 2008.<sup>1</sup> The reports were positive regarding the rollout of the program, its initial impact, and its future potential for enhancing early learning opportunities and school readiness. They also made reference to a variety of issues of specific relevance to the future consolidation of the program. Following are some relevant quotations,

#### **Getting qualified ECE staff**

“Despite the fact that there is a shortage of Early Childhood Education (ECE) professionals in BC, most school districts reported a good response from qualified applicants to the

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<sup>1</sup> Mort, J. et al (2007). *Evaluation of StrongStart BC – School-based (Preschool) Family Drop-In Centres*. Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) & StrongStartBC (Province of BC Ministry of Education), and Mort, J. et al (2008). *StrongStart BC, Evaluation 2008*. Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) & StrongStart BC (Province of BC Ministry of Education). (Preliminary findings).

advertised positions. While a few districts experienced difficulty locating specialized ECE staff, all those employed had the required ECE certificate and (as indicated by the following charts) most were experienced. Most facilitators were hired under an annual personal contract to the school district.”

### **Employment security for Centre facilitators**

“In most cases, facilitators expressed concern about the future of their employment status. One-year contracts do not provide employees with the job stability most people want. Part-time employment requires having two jobs. Facilitators want to be seen as members of the school and school district staff. Some have concerns about working through personal contracts and not belonging to a unionized group connected to the school district that has accompanying benefits.”

### **The need to better integrate StrongStart into the broader school environment**

“Those (programs) that had made an effort to integrate the StrongStart site as an integral part of the school were building a community, whereas those schools that had not yet achieved integration lacked the benefits. Parents in highly integrated sites expressed a feeling of belonging, not just to the site but also to the school...”

If StrongStart remains a part of the school system, it is important that the degree of school integration should be seen as a vital issue.”

The final HELP evaluation report elaborated on this last point by recommending that funding be provided by the Ministry of Education for full integration of StrongStart into the school system so as to enable better “professional development activities, classroom maintenance, collection of attendance data, supervision and evaluation of staff and financial management.” To further these important objectives, HELP recommended that the Ministry of Education “formalise the identity of the employer of the facilitator, the employer’s responsibility and role, and the reporting relationship so that it is consistent throughout the province.”

Another report recommendation suggested that school districts involve StrongStart facilitators as “an integral part of the school staff’s internal activities” and that further steps be made to include facilitators as staff in school events, professional development activities, and the sharing of facility and school resources.

### **Ministry of Education views on StrongStart needs and priorities**

In August of 2009 CUPE representatives met with Susan Kennedy, director of Diversity, Equity and Early Learning with the Ministry of Education to discuss StrongStart. Kennedy confirmed that many of these programs are being run in-house by school districts with others contracted to outside agencies or individuals. In her view the primary focus of attention and challenge facing programs was the need for training and staff development at both district and school-levels to support the acquisition of necessary staff credentials and skill sets. To this end, she saw the Ministry’s primary role in StrongStart as one of assisting with professional development for facilitators, and providing support for further program rollout across the province, while leaving actual administration and control in the hands of boards of education.

## Going forward

StrongStart is now in the process of completing its fourth year of operation. For most of the province, programs have been operated internally and staff employed within programs has formed part of existing support staff bargaining units. These districts have had the opportunity to focus greater attention on integrating staff into the mainstream of school district programming and operation. As confirmed in the HELP evaluations, districts lacking this element run a greater risk of having programs isolated and denied the opportunity to maximize effectiveness in ways which full integration with school district operation would bring.

An important component of such integration (and one confirmed by Ministry of Education officials) is the pursuit of professional development opportunities. Since mid-2006, support staff within BC have had the opportunity to avail themselves of training opportunities provided by a \$3 million Skills Enhancement program operated under the auspices of the joint labour-management Support Staff Education and Adjustment Committee (SSEAC). A significant portion of Skills Enhancement work has been directed at EAs with 43 of 58 participating school districts submitting staff development plans targeting upgrading for education assistants.

In late 2009, SSEAC gave the Skills Enhancement program an extended lease on life by committing a further \$3 million in funding to continue education and training work. Again, it is expected that education assistants and early childhood education will comprise a significant part of further upgrading activities supported by this program.

However, only those districts with StrongStart workers inside K-12 support staff bargaining units have the opportunity to use portions of this available funding to advance a skills development agenda for StrongStart workers. And such an agenda has been identified as being of paramount importance to further consolidation of StrongStart programs, by both the Human Early Learning Partnership and the Ministry of Education.

## Support staff early childhood education expertise

Integration into the normal and regular operation of board programs would bring an added benefit. Within CUPE support staff bargaining units there is a significant reservoir of internal early childhood education expertise. This much is confirmed in CUPE's second *Recognition & Respect* report, titled *Education assistants in BC: an educational profile and agenda* and released in April of 2009.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on survey information completed by more than 4,000 of BC's public school education assistants, the report documented that more close to one in five EAs – over 1,800 workers province-wide – reported having early childhood training and/or credentials. A majority of this group reported having college-level “post-basic” training which includes an emphasis on special education service delivery and programming with infants and toddlers. As the report notes,

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<sup>2</sup> John D. Malcolmson, *Education assistants in British Columbia: an educational profile and agenda*. CUPE BC Region, 2009.

“ECE programming has added relevance within the K-12 system in light of 2006 changes to the formal mandate of public schools with the inclusion of school system responsibility for literacy programs and early learning. The subsequent proliferation of new initiatives such as StrongStart along with plans for significant future expansion in this area suggest that ECE-level skills and credentials will face increasing school system demand in years to come.” (p. 6)

The opportunity to leverage this existing ECE expertise is important given the accelerated rollout of StrongStart programs throughout the province and their subsequent consolidation as a centrepiece of BC early learning initiatives. It is however an opportunity only available to school districts which operate StrongStart programs internally.

### **Dealing with programs run by outside agencies**

As is clear, StrongStart programs in BC face current challenges associated with enhancing the integration of services into other areas of school district programming, and with ongoing staff training and education. As confirmed by the HELP evaluations, these goals are best served by clarifying and standardizing employment relationships – in short, by efforts to bring outside programs “in-house.”

In the current context, efforts to bring StrongStart programs into the mainstream of school district programming are best facilitated through bilateral discussions involving districts and support staff unions like CUPE, and through negotiated arrangements which offer job security and employment continuity by grand-parenting existing program staff. Such an approach can also work to minimize any possible program disruption while also preserving existing staff and program expertise.

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