



## Position Statement on the Unionization of DECEs in the Full Day Early Learning program

In April 2010 the *Education Act* was amended<sup>1</sup> requiring school boards to offer a Full Day Early Learning program to all kindergarten-aged children in Ontario. To support children and families, the program includes fee-based hours, before and after the school day. School boards were given the additional authority to operate year round, extended day programming for children four- to 12-years-old.

The amendments recognize a new role of early childhood educators in elementary schools and name a distinct position with defined credentials and duties -- the Designated Early Childhood Educator (DECE). The DECE is a partner in the Full Day Early Learning program and is the lead educator for school-operated extended day/year programs for children four to 12 years. Over the next five years, as full day learning expands to all 4,034 elementary schools across the province, school boards will hire up to 20,000 Registered ECEs for DECE positions.

Full Day Early Learning offers tremendous opportunities as well as challenges for the early childhood profession. School boards are densely unionized environments and several unions are actively seeking to represent DECEs.

The AECEO believes that:

- The unionization of DECEs will have a profound and beneficial effect on the ECE profession.
- DECEs have different responsibilities from other ECE positions employed by school boards and must be recognized as a distinct professional designation.
- It is in the best interest of the profession to have one union represent all DECEs, as one voice would command greater strength and influence.
- The Early Learning Program and the educator partnership that leads it are best served by teachers and DECEs belonging to the same union. Single representation will promote greater cohesion in the program and a more collaborative approach to addressing potential challenges.

For these reasons the AECEO provincial board recommends that where possible ECEs working as DECEs in public and Catholic schools join the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO).

### **Background:**

ECEs have long been part of school settings working as education assistants, special needs

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<sup>1</sup> Full Day Early Learning Statute Law Amendment Act, 2010

resource teachers, in Parenting and Family Literacy Programs and in school located child care and family support programs.

Unlike the above positions, the DECE is a new professional designation with legislated duties. DECEs are directed to collaborate with teachers in the Early Learning program to “provide high quality and effective play-based education to support enhanced learning and cognitive, emotional and social development for children”<sup>2</sup>. They are the designated educator in extended day programs. Unlike an educational assistant the DECE has direct supervisory responsibilities in the classroom and reports directly to the principal.

When full day learning is fully implemented 20,000 DECEs will be employed by school boards. In such a densely unionized environment as education it is inevitable that the position will be organized. The unionization of a large majority of the profession provides opportunities for shared advocacy and the development of strategies for sectoral reform. As unionized members in a largely non-unionized profession, the ability of the DECEs to negotiate collectively will help drive demand across the profession for improved salaries and working conditions.

There are legitimate concerns that so many unionized ECEs working for large public sector employers will divide the profession into haves and have-nots, making it difficult for community programs to attract and retain qualified staff. But recruitment and retention problems are not new to the profession. Beyond the few ECEs working for large community agencies or for municipally operated programs, most are unorganized and work for small organizations without the resources to provide adequate salaries and working conditions.

To avoid such divisions within the ECE profession it is essential that the early learning plan outlined in the report “With Our Best Future in Mind” be fully established. This includes a seamless learning and care program for kindergarten-aged children, year-round, extended day programming for school aged children and Child and Family Centres for younger children and their families. A strategy for unionization must be included in the policy development so all ECEs are entitled to the benefits of unionization.

The AECEO recognizes the important advocacy efforts of many unions for high quality, accessible early learning and child care. ETFO is dedicated to professional development, has demonstrated support for the educator partnership in the Early Learning program, recognizes the DECE as a professional category distinct from educational assistants or other support staff and importantly ETFO supports the AECEO’s goal of enhancing the professionalization of ECEs. Therefore, we believe it makes the most sense for early childhood educators, who have the choice, to become members of ETFO.

For over 60 years the AECEO has represented early childhood educators. Promoting the profession and working for the benefit of its members is foremost to our mission. The AECEO will continue to actively advocate for the continued recognition and advancement of the ECE profession.

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<sup>2</sup> Full Day Early Learning Statute Law Amendment Act, 2010, page 1.