Child Care Fee Subsidy Extension to School Age Recreation and Sport Programs

A Report to the Ministries of Community and Social Services and Tourism, Culture and Recreation

Prepared by: Parks and Recreation Ontario

HIGH FIVE
Member Survey & Interim Implementation Report

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Executive Summary

On October 1, 2000, the Government of Ontario amended Regulation 262 under the Day Nurseries Act to extend child care fee subsidy to recreation and sport programs serving school aged children. In October 2001 Parks and Recreation Ontario took the initiative to investigate the experiences of recreation and sport to date by conducting a survey and key informant interviews with its HIGH FIVE Member and partner organizations.

Survey results indicated that there is high interest from recreation and sport in accessing fee subsidy under the Regulatory change. Some positive collaborative working relationships between subsidy delivery agents and recreation are taking place toward implementing the changes. The survey also revealed that both subsidy agents and the recreation and sport sector require more information in order to roll out the Regulatory change. Recreation organizations have many questions regarding the minimum criteria contained in the MCSS Child Care Service Management Guidelines. Subsidy delivery agents on the other hand require further information and understanding of the HIGH FIVE Quality Assurance Process and how this process facilitates a culture of quality within recreation and sport organizations. Recreation and subsidy agents also raised questions around how external validation of program quality will be conducted in the interim as HIGH FIVE develops its Accreditation model.

It is recommended that the Ontario Ministries of Community and Social Services (MCSS), Tourism, Culture and Recreation (MTCR), and Parks and Recreation Ontario (PRO) work collaboratively to develop a comprehensive and coordinated communication strategy that includes information sharing at both the province wide and local levels. It is also recommended that MCSS, MTCR and PRO explore ways to accelerate the development of the HIGH FIVE Accreditation model.
Introduction

On October 1, 2000, the Government of Ontario amended Regulation 262 under the Day Nurseries Act to extend child care fee subsidy to recreation and sport programs serving school aged children. Changes were made to provide more choice to families and more flexibility for fee subsidy delivery agents to address the needs of school aged children, thereby helping reduce waiting lists for licensed school aged child care. No additional funding was allocated to the current subsidy envelope but rather the existing envelope is now accessible to recreation and sport organizations.

The Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) released its Child Care Service Management Guidelines in December 2000 that outlines the criteria that recreation and sport programs must meet in order to qualify for fee subsidy. Among other requirements, the MCSS Guidelines stipulate that programs must be of high quality and either a Registered Member of the HIGH FIVE Quality Assurance Process (QAP) administered through Parks and Recreation Ontario (PRO) or, an Accredited member of the Ontario Camping Association (OCA).

October 2001 marked one year since the Regulatory change was put into effect. It is timely that the successes and challenges in implementing the Regulatory changes be assessed. Parks and Recreation Ontario took the initiative to investigate the experiences of recreation and sport to date by conducting a survey and key informant interviews with HIGH FIVE Member and partner organizations. The purpose of this report is therefore to discuss experiences to date in implementing the Regulatory change and, to provide suggestions and recommendations on how implementation could be enhanced, therefore accelerating the pace at which school aged children can benefit through increased choice and flexibility in their local communities.

Methodology

36 surveys were distributed via e-mail to HIGH FIVE Demonstration Sites, Provisional and Registered Members of the Quality Assurance Process. Surveys were directed to HIGH FIVE primary contacts within each organization, the majority of which are senior managers.

A total of 22 surveys (61%) were completed. 7 of these (32%) were completed through key informant interviews conducted over the phone.

The survey was successful in obtaining input from Members that represent the full geographical reach of the HIGH FIVE program across Ontario. Respondents represented a variety of types of recreation service providers including municipal, YMCA’s and YWCA’s and Boys and Girls Clubs and Community Recreation Associations.
Awareness of Amendments to Day Nurseries Act

All respondents (100%) indicated that prior to receiving the survey, they were aware that the Government of Ontario had amended the Day Nurseries Act to extend child care fee subsidy to recreation and sport programs serving school aged children.

Respondents revealed that they became aware of the amendments through mention in the HIGH FIVE Quality at Play newsletter, HIGH FIVE Quality Assurance Process presentations or because it was mentioned in HIGH FIVE training workshops. Some people thought they might have “caught wind” of it through a Parks and Recreation Ontario (PRO) newsletter but could not recall with certainty. Respondents often described that they “stumbled across” the information or “fell upon it by accident”. 1 respondent cited that they first heard of the Regulatory change officially through their local municipal or regional government.

PRO engaged in several specific communication strategies to raise awareness of this regulatory change.

- Article regarding change in Spring 2001 PROFile
- Article regarding change in Spring 2001 Quality at Play Newsletter
- Presentation about HIGH FIVE to OMSSA Child Care Committee
- Posted regulations and guidelines on Web Site in PDF format
- Answered questions from individual inquiries
- Assisted MCSS with the development of a Q & A fact sheet.

The findings imply that PRO has been successful in creating an awareness of the Regulatory change by utilizing its regular channels of communication with PRO and HIGH FIVE Members to the best of its current ability. However, while awareness level of the amendment is high among those organizations currently involved with HIGH FIVE, the ways in which organizations became informed raises questions around whether sport and recreation organizations not involved with HIGH FIVE or OCA are aware of the amendments.

A more concerted and efficient communication strategy is required so that recreation and sport organizations do not continue to “stumble” across the information and so that awareness is widespread across the Province. Heightened awareness of subsidy access will prompt organizations to become involved in quality assurance programs such as those offered through HIGH FIVE and the OCA, and thus increase the range of choice and flexibility we can collectively offer to families across Ontario.
Awareness and Understanding of the Minimum Criteria

Survey participants were asked whether they were aware of the minimum criteria that recreation and sport programs must meet in order to be eligible for fee subsidy (e.g. the criteria outlined under the MCSS Child Care Service Management Guidelines and, referred to in Regulation 797 of the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation Act). 12 survey participants (55%) said that they were aware of the minimum criteria and 10 people said that they were not informed (45%).

Key informant interviews revealed that even though people stated they were aware of minimum criteria this did not mean they fully understood, possessed or had read a copy of the MCSS Guidelines. For example, some of these respondents asked questions such as “can a sport organization qualify?” and “what do we need to accomplish as part of the HIGH FIVE Quality Assurance Process in order to qualify?” A question was raised as to whether the criteria will be mandated to all recreation and sport organizations that receive municipal funding or grants as opposed to leaving it open as a choice?

For those who are better acquainted with the criteria, there still exists many grey areas in interpreting the criteria and in understanding the procedures recreation and sport providers must follow to access fee subsidy. For example, the MCSS Guidelines state that 75% of staff must be HIGH FIVE trained. Some respondents are not clear on whether this refers to the staff of the specific program being subsidized or, to the entire organization? Furthermore, the criteria state that a HIGH FIVE QUEST 1 - Reviewing Best Practices self-assessment must be conducted. There is uncertainty around whether this means that the policies from QUEST 1 must be formalized and actively used when subsidy is applied for or, “in progress” of being developed and implemented? Some people expressed that since the criteria are perceived as loosely articulated, there exists some concern around whether recreation and sport might be open to discrimination unless a working relationship of mutual respect and cooperation exists between the subsidy agency and the recreation or sport organization seeking support for families in need.

Some municipalities have started taking steps towards formalizing the criteria in their policy manuals and informing recreation and sport organizations of the requirements that they must meet in order to qualify for subsidy. For example, the Children’s Services Section of the Niagara Region Community Services Department has expanded upon the MCSS Guidelines and has clearly articulated the standards that programs must adhere to in its Children’s Services Policy Manual. In cases such as Niagara Region, recreation and sport have unambiguous direction on what they must do in order to qualify.

The survey findings imply that a comprehensive and coordinated communication strategy is required that includes information sharing at both the province wide and local levels. On a broad level, better communication is required so that the recreation and sport sector fully understand the minimum criteria outlined in the MCSS Guidelines as well as the steps that they need to complete as part of the HIGH FIVE Quality Assurance Process. However, recreation and sport also need to be well informed of the requirements, systems and procedures for accessing fee subsidy specific to their local jurisdiction. The current MCSS Guidelines allow subsidy agents to set additional criteria, so requirements may vary somewhat from municipality to municipality.
External Validation of Program Quality

The survey revealed that recreation, sport and subsidy agents have questions around how external validation of program quality will be conducted in the interim as HIGH FIVE develops its Accreditation model.

Programs licensed under the Day Nurseries Act (DNA) currently undergo a process in which external consultants verify that program standards are being met in order to receive their licences, qualify for fee subsidy and staff wage subsidy. No fee is directly charged to the child care agency for this service.

HIGH FIVE’s *Quality Assurance Process (QAP)* is a 5 Step model that leads to Accreditation. To date, HIGH FIVE has developed its model up to and including Step 3 or the “Registered Member” phase. Once organizations reach Step 3, they fully engage the training, tools and resources of the QAP in preparation for Accreditation. While the number of recreation and sport organizations involved in meeting the requirements of Steps 1 through 3 grows each day, HIGH FIVE is only in the preliminary stage of developing Steps 4 and 5 of its Accreditation model in consultation with its Member organizations. Steps 4 and 5 are the phases of the QAP in which external validation of program quality and Accreditation are proposed to take place.

Until Steps 4 and 5 of the HIGH FIVE Accreditation model are fully developed, the questions around whether external checks are necessary, who will conduct external quality checks and how validation is to be funded will likely be reoccurring ones posed by recreation, sport and subsidy agents alike. In the interim, child care agencies may perceive that the playing field is not level in accessing fee subsidy until comparable systems of accountability are put in place for recreation, sport and child care. On the flip side, if recreation and sport are forced to wait until a system of external validation and Accreditation is fully developed before they qualify for subsidy, families on child care waiting lists will be denied increased choice and flexibility.

This dilemma illustrates the need for HIGH FIVE to accelerate the rate at which the Accreditation model is fully developed and implemented. However, current levels of funding received from the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Recreation (MTCR) and the Trillium Foundation are spread out to support all facets of the development and operation of HIGH FIVE. As a result, limited funds are available to further develop the Accreditation model. With additional support the HIGH FIVE program would be able to accelerate the development of the Accreditation model that includes external validation of adherence to standards and program excellence.
Interest In Fee Subsidy

All of the survey respondents (100%) stated that they were interested in accessing fee subsidy under the new Regulatory change and eligibility criteria. In fact, one respondent indicated it was the agency’s primary motivation for becoming a Member of HIGH FIVE’s Quality Assurance Process. Organizations are most interested in helping support families whose children are enrolled in summer, March Break, Christmas Break and after school programs.

This expression of enthusiasm coupled with some fine examples cited by survey respondents of initiative, success and collaboration between recreation and fee subsidy agents in municipalities such as Niagara, Halton Region, the Regional Municipality of York and the City of London implies that in spite of any challenges experienced in the first year of fee subsidy extension, the Regulatory changes are worth keeping and working on for school aged children and their families.

Recreation & Sport’s Experiences to Date

19 out of the 22 respondents (86%) indicated that their organizations have started to discuss accessing fee subsidy with representatives from local municipal or regional government delivery agents. To date, 5 of those 22 organizations (23%) have been successful in receiving fee subsidy for children enrolled in non-licensed programs.

Overall, survey participants reported that their discussions to date have been positive. They most often used words like “satisfactory”, “encouraging”, “very supportive”, “productive” and “informative”. The discussions are different levels of progress from municipality to municipality. In 3 cases, recreation organizations have had purchase of service agreements drafted and presented to them through their local municipality. In other cases the word “unresolved” was used to describe discussions to date since they have just begun to get underway. A few people used the term “frustrating” to describe their interactions because they have been waiting for up to 8 months for criteria to be finalized into policy after having completed their initial discussions earlier in 2001. 5 of the 19 respondents (26%) who have been involved in some level of discussion around subsidy indicated that it was the representatives of the subsidy agent or community services department who approached them first and initiated the discussion (e.g. the City of London).

While 86% of respondents indicated they have entered into some level of discussions with their local subsidy delivery agents, some people within this group also indicated that they still had many questions and gray areas to work through. This feedback supports the notion presented earlier in this report that further information and support is required for recreation and sport so they can enter into discussions with a solid knowledge base.
Adoption of New Regulations & Additional Conditions

Survey participants were asked whether their local fee subsidy delivery agents had decided to formally adopt the extension of subsidy to recreation and sport programs as allowed by the new Regulations. 9 respondents (41%) indicated that the extension had been adopted while 2 indicated that they had not (9%). 11 respondents (50%) were unsure.

Of the 9 people who stated that their local delivery agents had adopted the new criteria 1 person indicated that additional conditions had been placed on accessing fee subsidy beyond the criteria outlined under the MCSS Guidelines. 3 people said they were unsure if additional conditions had been placed on them and 5 stated that no additional conditions had been placed on them. Upon further analysis it was determined that 5 of the 8 people who stated that they were “unsure” or that “no additional conditions” had been placed on them work in communities where additional conditions have in fact been put into policy.

The findings illustrate that there may be a discrepancy in what people think is policy and what is actual policy. A lack of information could potentially negatively impact on families. If an agency thinks it is doing everything according to criteria and procedure, it may find out too late that their programs do not qualify because of additional conditions. This may mean that families will need to make alternative arrangements for their children at the last minute assuming that alternative school aged child care spaces exist in that community.

The above findings also reveal that some subsidy agents are exercising the flexibility offered to them in the MCSS Guidelines to set additional criteria. The MCSS Guidelines state that subsidy “delivery agents are responsible for assessing and monitoring the eligibility of recreation programs for child care funding based on the requirements.” and that subsidy agents “may also set additional eligibility criteria” (page 6).

An example of additional eligibility criteria was found in one subsidy eligibility policy that was reviewed as part of this survey. The policy expanded upon the minimum standards reflected in QUEST 1 to more closely resemble those in the Day Nurseries Act. It also stipulated that all of the standards must be in place and actively used in order for recreation or sport to qualify for subsidy. Completion of the HIGH FIVE standards tool QUEST 1 – Reviewing Best Practices is one of the minimum requirements identified in the MCSS Guidelines. The MCSS Guidelines do not stipulate that all of the recommended best practices contained in QUEST 1 need to be formalized when subsidy is applied for but rather the tool itself must be completed. Use of QUEST 1 is intended to facilitate an ongoing and continuous process of quality improvement within organizations. HIGH FIVE recommends to its Member organizations that the tool be utilized annually as a means of evaluating whether policies and procedures are being communicated effectively, adhered to and that they reflect the needs of children.

This example calls into question whether subsidy agents understand how the HIGH FIVE Quality Assurance Process builds an organizational culture of quality for children. The HIGH FIVE model places great value on the process of organizational development as well as the end result of high quality programs. The HIGH FIVE Quality Assurance Process involves more than meeting standards so that organizations can be accredited annually. It is designed so that
organizations continually reflect and make choices that will support quality services for children. HIGH FIVE is also committed to protecting the standards and integrity of our provincial subsidy system. Asking recreation and sport to mirror the standards and practices of child care agencies that have operated for years under the DNA removes the focus from the process and places it on immediate adherence thus undermining the long term benefits of the HIGH FIVE process. In addition, organizational development takes time and resources and as such, pushing agencies too fast and their resources too far could breed poor relations between recreation and sport and their local subsidy agents.

As the systems, policies and practices of recreation, sport and child care are dovetailed, MCSS, MTCR and PRO must facilitate a collaborative working relationship among stakeholders that is based on mutual respect, patience and understanding. Some pro-active steps can be taken now to facilitate a smooth roll out of the new Regulations across the province. Improved communication between recreation, sport and child care will help build an understanding of, and trust in the HIGH FIVE Quality Assurance Process. Piloting and sharing some good models that demonstrate how the system can work for families regardless of mandates, constraints and historical patterns of operation may be one of the many ways we can roll out the new Regulatory changes.

Understanding of HIGH FIVE Among Delivery Agents

11 survey participants (50%) thought that their fee subsidy local delivery agents demonstrated that they understand the HIGH FIVE program and the way in which it supports the development of a culture of quality. Some of the respondents indicated that based on their experience they felt understanding levels were “minimal”. 2 people (9%) said they thought subsidy delivery agents lacked any understanding of HIGH FIVE and 9 people (41%) were unsure of their understanding level.

11 survey participants (50%) thought their delivery agents demonstrated that it values and supports the HIGH FIVE program where the other 11 respondents (50%) were unsure. Some respondents commented on a trend in municipal government whereby recreation departments are being amalgamated into the same “community services” department with children’s services. A positive evolution is slowly taking place where staff from child care and recreation are communicating more frequently and working together more closely than in previous organizational structures.

The perception and experiences of half of the respondents indicates that those who administer subsidy require more information about HIGH FIVE and its Quality Assurance Process. The survey revealed that there are many examples of positive collaborative working relationships in existence. But as noted earlier, placing additional conditions too quickly on recreation and sport organizations could undermine those relationships. Forcing recreation and sport to conform to current systems or procedures in child care may make it easier for subsidy agents to administer subsidy however it does not support the building of trust, understanding and collaboration. It is imperative that subsidy agents make informed decisions around which recreation and sport programs qualify and that they fully understand the benefits of the process that organizations involved with HIGH FIVE must undergo as they build a culture of quality. HIGH FIVE is
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relatively new and while it mirrors many of the standards, policies and procedures of child care agencies that operate under the DNA, it is also unique in many respects.

**Conclusion**

Key informant interviews revealed that the lack of understanding of the Amendments goes deeper than simply not understanding the criteria contained in the *MCSS Child Care Service Management Guidelines* and all of its intricacies. Some people interviewed were unclear as to whether the Ontario government had allocated “extra” money to subsidize children involved in sport and recreation. The current situation is that many more agencies have been allowed to access the existing subsidy envelope through the Amendment.

Others asked whether HIGH FIVE was responsible for allocating and administering the subsidy funds. For many recreation and sport agencies, accessing subsidy is brand new and represents a foreign process that involves working within the constructs of a different system (child care). Organizations like the YWCA and YMCA are more familiar with the systems and processes of applying for subsidy since many of their branches have a long history of offering both licensed and non-licensed programs. But even those organizations will need to learn the ins and outs of accessing subsidy under different quality assurance processes such as HIGH FIVE and OCA. Similar learning curves and growing pains will be experienced from childcare and subsidy agents as they learn to work with quality assurance processes and systems that are not exactly like their own.

Sharing successful models and an ongoing dialogue to address questions and work through grey areas of subsidy criteria is imperative to help dovetail accountability, criteria, processes and systems of child care, recreation and sport. The quality assurance standards and practices of HIGH FIVE, OCA and the DNA all have the safety and healthy development of children at their core. The three programs are already showing success and promise that they can co-exist within the same fee subsidy system in some municipalities (e.g. Halton and Niagara). Increased communication among all stakeholders and established systems of accountability will help roll out the new Regulations smoothly for families and program providers in this “learning and growing phase”.

Parks & Recreation Ontario 12 November 2001
Recommendations

Based on the feedback and findings of our member survey, Parks and Recreation Ontario offers the following recommendations for consideration by the Ministries of Community and Social Services and Tourism, Culture and Recreation:

1. Access to child care fee subsidy continue to be extended to quality recreation and sport programs serving school aged children as amended under Regulation 262 of the Day Nurseries Act.

2. PRO, OCA, MCSS, and MTCR collaboratively explore methods and the resources required for a communication strategy to:
   a. Increase the awareness of regulatory change and the understanding of minimum criteria among recreation and sport program providers serving school aged children, including those not currently affiliated with HIGH FIVE or the Ontario Camping Association.
   b. Increase understanding of the HIGH FIVE Quality Assurance Process among subsidy delivery agents.
   c. Facilitate dialogue and the sharing of information between recreation, sport, child care and subsidy delivery agents at the local level.

3. PRO, MCSS, and MTCR discuss possible interim solutions to resolve issues around external validation and ongoing monitoring of program quality as well as means of accelerating the development of HIGH FIVE’s full Accreditation model.