



Our intentional journey of growth

Enhancing diversity, equity
and inclusion in Peel's
EarlyON system

Contents

- Acknowledgements** **3**
 - Land acknowledgement 3
 - Project lead: S.M.D. Consulting Inc 3
 - Staff and family participants 3
- Director’s message** **4**
- Executive summary** **5**
- 1. Introduction** **7**
 - EarlyON system 7
- 2. EarlyON DEI assessment** **9**
 - Our approach 9
 - EarlyON workforce survey 9
 - EarlyON family engagement 10
- 3. DEI enhancements** **13**
 - Data collection 13
 - Continuous Quality Improvement approach 14
 - Professional learning 14
- 4. DEI recommendations** **15**
- 5. Next steps** **17**
- 6. Conclusion** **19**

Acknowledgements

Land acknowledgement

We recognize the land on which Peel Region operates is part of the Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit. For thousands of years, Indigenous peoples inhabited and cared for this land, and continue to do so today. In particular, we acknowledge the territory of the Anishinabek, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Ojibway/Chippewa peoples; the land that is home to the Métis; and most recently, the territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation who are direct descendants of the Mississaugas of the Credit.

We are grateful for the opportunity to work on this land, and by doing so, give our respect to its first inhabitants.

Project lead: S.M.D. Consulting Inc.



Consultant(s) with diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) expertise and knowledge of Peel's early years and child care system led the comprehensive assessment of DEI in the EarlyON system. This report captures the significant efforts, findings and recommendations developed by S.M.D. Consulting Inc. and team. The consultant team includes Sharon Douglas (lead), Seema Taneja (Taneja Consulting Inc.), Anne Marie Coughlin, Jen Turner and Leslie Douglas-Shaw. We would like to acknowledge and thank this team for their excellent work, support and dedication to this journey.

Staff and family participants

S.M.D. Consulting Inc. engaged with EarlyON leaders, staff and families to enhance our understanding of the current system. We are grateful to the parents and caregivers who shared their time and valuable feedback through our engagement activities. This feedback is important to us and we are using it to inform program planning and ensure that EarlyON services meet the needs of the communities that we serve.

In addition, we are thankful to the EarlyON leadership and staff who supported our efforts in reaching diverse families across EarlyON Centres in Peel.

Director's message

Dear EarlyON staff, leadership, and families,

Following tragic events and ongoing social injustice, we know that there needs to be more awareness and action to address discrimination. As Peel Region is one of the most diverse regions in Canada, it is especially important that our programs and services are equitable, inclusive, and reflective of our community.

In our early years and child care programs and services in Peel, this means that we must strengthen our DEI practices to make sure that all families can enjoy welcoming places that support their child's growth and development.

Over the past year, this journey has shown us that we can do more to improve our understanding of our community, identify and address gaps in representation, and create a sense of belonging that all families should feel in our programs.

In this report, you'll find the key steps we have taken to build our understanding of DEI and look at ways that we can further support this in Peel's EarlyON system. The lessons that we've learned in EarlyON will help us as we begin to develop a DEI strategy for our broader early years and child care system.

Early Years and Child Care programs provide an important service to our community. We need to make sure that DEI is always part of our planning and programs to build a welcoming community. We are grateful to the EarlyON agencies that have done this work with us and all of their staff who are committed to this journey and always work hard to provide high-quality, equitable and inclusive environments to our families in Peel.

Nakiema Palmer, Director, Early Years and Child Care Services



Executive summary

EarlyON Child and Family Centres (EarlyON) provide free drop-in and registered programs for families with young children from birth to 6 years old. EarlyON centres are welcoming places for families to play with their child(ren), make new connections in their community and access quality programs that help parents and caregivers to build their well-being and knowledge about children's early learning and development.

It is important that EarlyON is available to all families across Peel, including those who may not know about EarlyON, do not see themselves in the programs, or do not feel like they belong at EarlyON centres. The steps we have taken during this DEI journey will help EarlyON agencies to continue improving their programs to better reflect the diversity of their communities and create inclusive and welcoming environments that meet the needs of Peel families.

Working with our DEI consultant, S.M.D. consulting and team, we have taken important steps in an ongoing journey to measure and improve DEI in our EarlyON system.

Key objectives:

- Improve program planning using data and evidence from our community.
- Use what we learn to help us better reach and engage families.
- Build and maintain DEI competency.
- Create meaningful, high-quality experiences in all EarlyON programs.

Peel Region, S.M.D. consulting and EarlyON agencies worked together to gather information about staff and family EarlyON experiences through surveys, focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

S.M.D. consulting and team have recommended to both Peel Region and EarlyON agencies how to keep improving DEI. Some of these recommendations include:

- Increasing accountability and making sure agencies have DEI plans.
- Reviewing and improving human resources policies to support recruitment and retention of diverse staff and board members.
- Providing more training and dedicated time for DEI.
- Increasing outreach to communities that may not be aware of EarlyON services.
- Creating welcoming environments for everyone.

Next steps

EarlyON agencies have already begun to take steps to continue the DEI journey. They have submitted their first DEI action plans and have begun to implement key actions from their plans to enhance DEI in EarlyON, including reviewing Human Resources (HR) practices from an inclusive and equitable lens and building connections with community partners.

Each agency has also developed Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plans and Outreach Plans that reflect what they've learned and address their local community needs. CQI goals include engaging in professional learning, ensuring environments are accessible for all families, and creating and enhancing diverse learning experiences that allow families to actively engage in programs. Actions identified in Outreach Plans include community events, partnership building, presentations, and social media posts. The actions that agencies are taking, as identified in these plans, work together to ensure that we are providing high quality services and reach families that may be unaware of our programs.

We will provide professional learning focused on DEI for all staff and leaders starting in 2024. Communities of learning and practice will allow EarlyON staff and leaders to discuss and learn from each other about key concepts of DEI, consider the role of leadership in supporting DEI, and explore the connections between DEI and quality in EarlyON programs. At the end of the training, staff and leaders will have increased their knowledge of DEI which will be reflected in their EarlyON practices.

We are committed to doing better in Peel's EarlyON programs. That means strengthening our relationships with community partners to reach underrepresented communities and making sure we measure the ongoing impact of our DEI work.





1. Introduction

Peel's EarlyON system wants to create the best environment for all employees and families. Our community told us that not all EarlyON programs reflect the communities they serve and that some families do not know about the programs, or do not feel they are welcomed. This report outlines the important steps that we are taking to do better and increase DEI in the EarlyON system.

EarlyON system

EarlyON centres offer free, accessible, high-quality programs for families with children from birth to six years of age. In Peel Region, there are seven agencies that deliver EarlyON programs at 58 sites located in schools, libraries, and other community-based spaces. These EarlyON agencies are: BridgeWay Family Centre, Caledon Parent Child Centre, Child Development Resource Connection Peel, Dixie Bloor Neighbourhood Centre, Family Day Care Services, Malton Neighbourhood Services and PLASP Child Care Services.

EarlyON centres offer a range of services where families can:

- Thrive in their relationship with their children.
- Get advice and help from early child development professionals.
- Find out about and get connected to other services in their community.
- Get to know other families in their community.
- Enjoy fun activities such as reading, storytelling and games that support healthy child development.

Peel Region works with several partners to support EarlyON, including:

- The Indigenous Network (TIN): Delivers the Journey Together Outreach Program at some EarlyON locations. This program provides Indigenous-led cultural activities and awareness for both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous families.
- Child Development Resource Connection Peel: Supports professional learning for EarlyON staff.
- EveryMind Mental Health Services: Provides child development supports and helps families to access resources if they have questions or concerns about their child's development.

There are dedicated French-language EarlyON (ON y va) sites and EarlyON programs that are offered in languages such as Mandarin, Punjabi, and Urdu.





2. EarlyON DEI assessment

Our approach

S.M.D. Consulting worked with EarlyON teams, Peel staff and other key groups to gather information on DEI in EarlyON. This included a staff survey, parent engagement, observations from visits to EarlyON centres and a review of current and best practices. The findings have helped us focus our work and begin to make changes that support DEI.

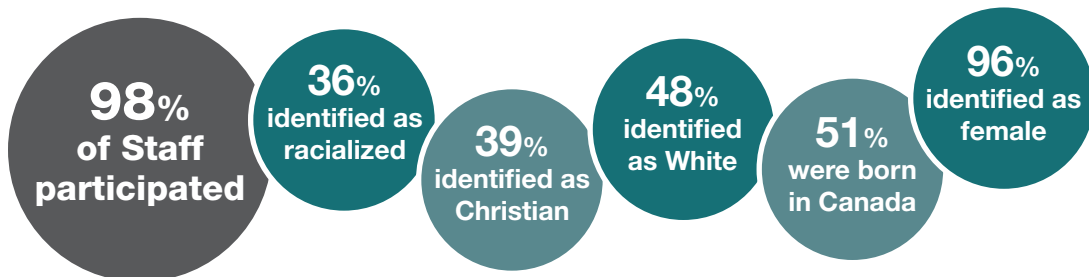
EarlyON workforce survey

An impressive 91 per cent of EarlyON staff and board members completed our first workforce survey in spring 2022. The results show engagement, progress, openness, and the value EarlyON teams place on DEI. However, there are ways we can do better and build on this work.

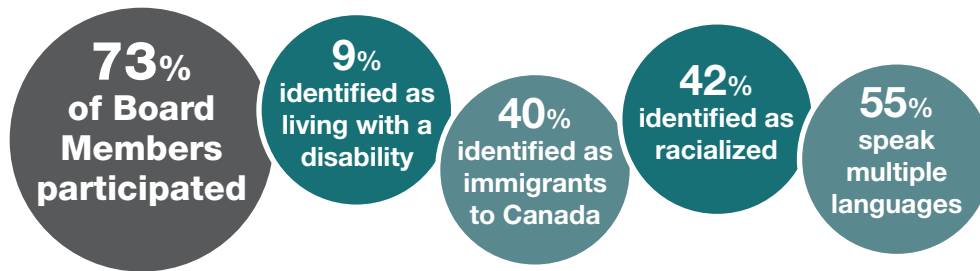
When looking at DEI survey results, it's important to pay attention to those who disagree or don't answer certain questions. These responses can reveal gaps and barriers to full participation, silenced voices, and lack of understanding about policies.

Key findings:

EarlyON staff and leadership



EarlyON board



Key learnings:

- Most staff (89%) agreed that their agency is committed to DEI, but less (68%) are familiar with their agency's DEI strategy.
- Some staff (27%) report that they have experienced incidences of harassment and discrimination.
- Racialized staff were less represented at the leadership level.
- There were high rates of agreement from all staff, including racialized persons, in areas of equity and inclusion (for example, do they feel comfortable being themselves at work, are job evaluations fair, do they feel valued).

Opportunities for growth:

- Opportunity to increase diversity and representation in the EarlyON workforce.
- Increase open and consistent sharing of DEI work across EarlyON agencies.
- Address gaps in staff representation.
- Build DEI into staff orientation and performance expectations.
- Improve representation in Boards and build DEI into member roles and responsibilities.
- Further explore experiences of discrimination and exclusion, to better understand these situations and identify actions to address and prevent them in the future.

EarlyON family engagement

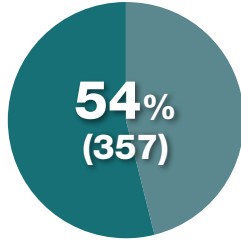
S.M.D. Consulting and team worked with families who use EarlyON services to learn about their experiences and think through how to improve outreach.

A total of 87 parents and caregivers representing multiple ethnic backgrounds, varied household incomes and ages participated in eight in-person focus groups and two virtual sessions. A total of 667 EarlyON surveys were completed.¹ People

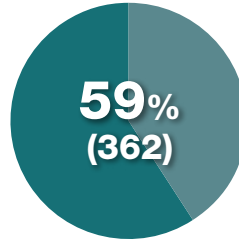
¹ Efforts were made to reach families that actively engage in Peel's EarlyON programs and ensure no duplication in responses. The region values the important learnings of this survey, however, it is important to consider that some response duplication could have occurred and results should be considered within this context.

who took this survey included those with varied ethnic backgrounds, religions, sexual orientations, and people living with disabilities.

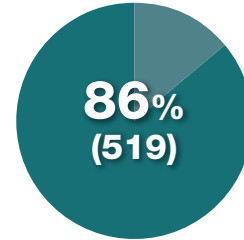
Key findings:



of people felt that staff reflected their race, culture or religion.



of people who completed the survey felt that they had been treated differently based on their ethnicity or other factors.



of people who completed the survey said that they would recommend EarlyON programs to family and friends with young children.

- Families usually learn about EarlyON programs through friends, family, or online.
- EarlyON strengths include:
 - **Physical spaces:** Centres have different rooms and activities, great space, and clean facilities.
 - **Programs:** Always new and different activities, including the specialized programs, such as gardening, Zumba, parenting café and cooking.
 - **Staff:** Participants appreciate that staff are non-judgemental, open and supportive. Staff provide advice and resources for parents, and many speak different languages other than English. EarlyON centres were described “like a family” where people feel a sense of community.
- No families reported acts of discrimination or racism, but some families spoke about exclusionary behaviour from staff or other families.
- Families shared that staff are all nice, welcoming, and competent however, some families noted that there is a difference between being nice and being welcoming.
- Black parents and caregivers are underrepresented at EarlyON programs.
- While most responses reflect positive EarlyON experiences, there is an opportunity for improvement in satisfaction levels.
- Families were clear that not all EarlyON centres were the same and they were willing to drive to preferred locations where they felt welcome.
- For young families immigrating to Canada, EarlyON programs are a place to meet people, reduce isolation, develop language skills, and learn about other cultures.

Opportunities for growth:

- EarlyON staff must continue to work hard to ensure that all families feel welcomed, build connections between families in centres and create opportunities to share with each other.
- Review program hours of operations to make them more accessible on evenings and weekends.
- Provide programming and outreach that encourages greater participation and sense of belonging for fathers and grandfathers.
- Celebrate cultures more often and use diverse toys, books, materials, and activities. Strengthen outreach methods by connecting to community groups, promoting EarlyON programs using clear language and making sure promotion is available in multiple languages.





3. DEI enhancements

Data collection

In October 2022, Peel Region added the following key questions into the EarlyON registration process: gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity/race, language spoken, religion, household income level and immigration. These questions are voluntary and do not impact families' ability to use EarlyON services.

Why we're asking these questions:

- To understand families that are and are not attending EarlyON programs.
- To increase understanding of local communities that are being served.
- To find and remove any barriers that make it hard for people to access or fully participate in EarlyON programs.
- To create EarlyON programs that meet local community needs.
- To improve our decision-making by layering information from these questions with other sources of data, including population census and information from Peel Region's Data Portal.

We know that people have many different parts of their identity, and these parts can't be separated. For example, being a Black woman who is Muslim affects a person's experiences in unique ways. We also understand that these questions don't tell us everything about how families feel when they use EarlyON services. We'll keep looking for ways to learn more about families' experiences in a meaningful way across our services to make EarlyON even better for everyone.

Continuous Quality Improvement approach

The Continuous Quality Improvement Tool (CQI) helps EarlyON agencies reflect on their programs and measure quality. DEI is a key element of quality in EarlyON. Centres must be equitable, diverse and inclusive for all children and families. With this in mind, we updated the CQI tool to more clearly include DEI as a stand-alone element and as part of all other elements.

Having DEI as a standalone element underlines its importance in our expectations and encourages educators to be reflective on how they can practice, document and plan to ensure all families experience a sense of belonging that is foundational to delivering high quality programs.

CQI Framework

Quality Statement High Quality programs and services are designed to support positive, inclusive, and equitable experiences and outcomes; and to foster nurturing relationships between children, parents, caregivers, and educators.



Professional learning

To enhance DEI in EarlyON programs across Peel, S.M.D. Consulting has developed professional learning courses for EarlyON staff, leadership and board members.

All EarlyON staff will complete these courses using a community of learning and practice approach where: a) people come together to share practices and create knowledge; and b) open conversation is encouraged, with each participant seen as an expert in their own knowledge and experience.

As a result of this learning, staff and leaders will have increased and enhanced their knowledge of DEI, considered their own views and assumptions, understood how supporting DEI as a core value can strengthen their ability to serve diverse and racialized families, and understood the connections between DEI and program quality.



4. DEI recommendations

Key recommendations resulting from the EarlyON DEI Assessment findings were developed by S.M.D. Consulting. The recommendations are grouped for EarlyON agencies and Peel Region that oversees EarlyON programs.

Recommendations to EarlyON agencies

- 1. Develop and Implement DEI strategies:** Create and share DEI strategies to increase DEI competency and representation of diverse and racialized communities across EarlyON staff, families and programs.
- 2. Review policies:** Review all policies and procedures through a DEI lens, with special attention to recruitment and retention, harassment and discrimination, and religious accommodations.
- 3. Strengthen recruitment processes:** Create plans to recruit staff and board members that reflect the communities they serve, as well as measure their progress.
- 4. Incorporate clear expectations:** Connect DEI goals to staff performance expectations, program design and delivery.
- 5. Increase engagement with the Black community:** Collaborate with Black-led community and faith-based organizations to increase awareness of EarlyON programs in the Black community.
- 6. Authentic participation:** EarlyON staff and leadership must genuinely participate in DEI professional learning and use this knowledge in their day-to-day work.
- 7. Enhance outreach strategies for equity deserving groups:** Review outreach strategies and the language used in EarlyON advertising to make sure it's clear to all audiences especially in high density immigrant/racialized communities.

Recommendations to Peel Region

- 1. Increase accountability:** Require EarlyON agencies to create, share and implement DEI action plans that are consistent with Peel's commitment to DEI.
- 2. Enhance the collection and use of client information when planning services:** Use the new client data collected during the EarlyON registration process (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity/race, language spoken, religion, household income level and immigration) to plan programs that meet community needs and help us understand where programs need to be improved.
- 3. Mandate system-wide DEI professional learning:** Require professional learning to build EarlyON staff knowledge and capacity to lead and implement DEI.
- 4. Increase professional development hours:** Give staff space to build their DEI learnings into their programs.
- 5. Increase service delivery hours:** Review the current program hours and work to increase options such as evenings and weekends that better serve families in the community.





5. Next steps



DEI action plans

EarlyON agencies developed DEI action plans with key actions and measurable outcomes. Agencies are now working on key actions as identified in their plans and are engaging in progress check-in meetings with Peel Region staff.



Professional learning

EarlyON staff and leadership will participate in tailored professional learning courses starting in 2024.



CQI assessment and plans

EarlyON staff and leadership are engaging in the CQI process using the newly updated tool that will help them better reflect on DEI as part of quality programming.



Community engagement and outreach

EarlyON agencies created and are implementing community engagement and outreach plans to increase awareness of EarlyON and build connections between EarlyON programs, families and community partners. This includes opportunities to build awareness of EarlyON in diverse and racialized groups who are underrepresented in programs through community events, social media posts, and school board events.



Community partnerships

We will support EarlyON agencies in building strong relationships with community partners, including non-profit organizations that serve our diverse and vulnerable populations, to enhance program offerings and reach.



EarlyON service area review

We will review current EarlyON service delivery areas to ensure that we are meeting the needs of local communities.



Comprehensive evaluation

We are developing an evaluation framework together with the University of Toronto Centre for Child Development, Mental Health and Policy, to assess our DEI efforts and impact.





6. Conclusion

This report acknowledges the significant amount of work that has been completed during this initial phase of our journey. In partnership with Peel's EarlyON agencies and staff, we have made progress towards achieving an enhanced understanding of DEI representation, competencies, and practices.

We know there is still work to be done. This ongoing work relies on the strong commitment of our system to continue to progress, move forward with uncomfortable conversations and address existing gaps and inequities. We appreciate being on this journey with you, as we learn and grow together.

