Appendix B: Current Environment

Ministry of Education data indicate that approximately 245,000 students attended Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten in Ontario in 2003-2004.

In 2002, approximately half of school boards in Ontario had written policies in place that addressed entry-to-school planning, primarily for children with special needs. Most of the remaining school boards followed informal procedures, with many school boards indicating a desire to move to a more formal protocol. However, stakeholders remained concerned about the inconsistency in planning for entry to school and the possibility that children were entering school without adequate preparation.

Various environmental factors affect planning for entry to school, including the numbers of children coming to school, the composition of their family unit, and their level of literacy.

School entry is generally easier for next-borns and their families, as they already have some experience of school before they begin. According to data from Statistics Canada’s 2001 census, Ontario is home to more than 2 million families. More than half of those have two or more children: 41 per cent have one child at home; 40 per cent have two children at home; and more than 18 per cent include three or more children at home.

Society is becoming increasingly knowledge-based, causing economic and social shifts, as well as changes in the nature of childhood and the family unit. Around the world, children no longer spend the first five years of their lives at home with their mothers.
In Ontario, the majority of preschool children (more than 70 per cent) live in either two-parent families where both parents work or single-parent families where the single parent works. In many countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), children are increasingly growing up in lone-parent households. As a result, more and more children spend a greater part of their early childhood in out-of-home settings—often in multiple settings with multiple caregivers.

Ontario society is also characterized by increasing ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, a factor that can affect how children function in the language of the classroom and their development of literacy and numeracy skills.

Nonetheless, the quality of parental interaction with children in the early years remains a key factor in their performance. Studies show a strong link between children’s readiness to learn and their parents’ engagement in literacy acquisition (McCain and Mustard, 1999).

Literacy and numeracy are among the principal components of school readiness. Evidence shows that children with poor verbal and literacy skills at school entry tend not to do well in the school system, and it is difficult to improve their outcomes later on. Developmentally, there is only a narrow window of opportunity for a child to cultivate a high level of literacy. By the age of eight, children who have not learned fundamental literacy can be expected to struggle throughout the rest of their schooling and consequently face an increased risk of dropping out of school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004).