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Family Foundation

## What the research tells us about New Brunswick's Early Childhood Development Centres

The *Early Years Studies*, co-chaired by the Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain and Dr. Fraser Mustard<sup>1</sup> brought the science of early human development to the attention of policy makers and the public. Their work acknowledges that modern families need a modern support system, one that places the healthy development of children at the centre, but also strives to support a healthy balance of work and family life.

The studies called on governments to invest in the early years at the same rate as for older children and to address their developmental needs through the creation of integrated children's centres, linked to public education and sensitive to local communities. Since then, initiatives in Toronto, South Australia and the United Kingdom have used this vision to consolidate existing early childhood programs into working models to inform public policy change.

Drawing on these cumulative experiences the Government of New Brunswick with support from the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation (MWMFF), created eight demonstration sites reflecting the urban and rural, Francophone and Anglophone diversity of the province.

### **Features of the Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDC)**

The integrated Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDC) model combines regulated child care, education, family and community health services into a single, accessible program designed to meet the needs of children and their families from the prenatal period through to the transition to elementary school. The three-year pilot project was designed to inform program practice and provide policy makers with a guide to building a comprehensive, accessible, accountable family-oriented child care and education system.

The Health and Education Research Group (HERG) at the University of New Brunswick has evaluated the ECDCs from their inception. Their findings point to benefits for children, families and educators.

#### 1. Children

Children who regularly attended the centres were more confident in the school setting and showed less anxiety transitioning from preschool into kindergarten and school routines. The

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<sup>1</sup> *Early Years Study* (McCain, Mustard, 1999); *Early Years Study 2* (McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007), *Early Years Study 3* (McCain, Mustard & McCuaig, 2011).

school site also minimized transitions for children involved in after-school programming and was found to be an effective location for children with disabilities and additional needs to build on their social skills. The Francophone centres enhanced opportunities for preschool-aged children to gain fluency in speaking French, and an understanding of their Francophone culture.

## 2. Parents

Parents reported strong satisfaction with the Early Childhood Development Centres. Their comfort entering the school and engaging with their children's educators increased, as did their involvement in their children's early learning. The range of on-site child care options was noted as a benefit relieving the stress of multiple drop-offs and pick-ups. The delivery of support services such as speech and language, intensive behaviour intervention for children diagnosed with autism, hearing tests, etc., eliminated extra travel and reduced time away from work. Opportunities to build social networks and the ability for families with children with disabilities and additional needs to provide mutual support were seen as particular advantages.

## 3. Educators

Educators working with children and families blended family-centred practice with early childhood curriculum and pedagogy. The staff team, including early intervention service providers, promoted the early identification of developmental problems in children and a timely response. Children's progress is documented and carried forward, into the formal education system. Enhanced opportunities to interact with parents has led to stronger relationships between educators and parents and contributed to shared understandings and goals for children's learning.

## 4. Cultural and Linguistic Literacy

Participants in the Francophone regions recognized the importance of the ECDCs in French language acquisition and preserving cultural identity through the delivery of services in French, and in Francisation support offered to ayant droit families.

## 5. Utilization and revenue:

Partnerships and efficiencies due to integration allowed all demonstration sites to increase the hours and range of services offered. Revenue for the sites was generated from five key sources: time limited funding for startup and reorganization; wage enhancement funding; fees from parents and/or child care fee subsidies; donations and fundraising. Integration played a role in reducing the average cost per hour of service from \$16.48 in year one to \$6.49 per hour of service in year 3. Over the three-year period, the four government-supported sites each received \$100,000 a year over 3 years. The four MWMFF sites received a total of \$500,000. The MWMFF provided another \$500,000 for research and evaluation.

## Challenges

The evaluation identified three major challenge areas that hinder families from accessing services.

- Transportation and financial challenges were barriers to reaching the most vulnerable families. . Further, parents experiencing unemployment or struggling to meet their family's shelter and food needs, may find it to difficult to focus on their children's early learning.

- Outreach was hampered by a general lack of awareness of the role quality early education and care plays in children's development. Some families are distrustful of service providers based on their own experiences, leading to fears that they may lose their children or have their parenting styles judged.
- Barriers to the development of comprehensive case plans challenged service coordination. In particular, insufficient communication among partners offering services to the same family, a lack of reciprocal understanding among service providers of each other's mandates, roles, responsibilities and eligibility requirements and a lack of provincial guidance regarding coordination at the community level.

Other challenges to access included:

- A lack of a service base in rural areas
- Space limitation in some schools
- Finding and sustaining quality services in French
- Guaranteeing the uniformity and quality of services
- Attracting and keeping qualified early childhood educators

*Putting Children First; Positioning Early Childhood for the Future*, the province's three year early childhood action plan released in June 2012, created the management structure for early childhood services that are supportive and responsive to both linguistic communities at the provincial and local levels. This sets the foundation for:

- Building a continuum of learning and care that begins at birth.
- Providing accessible, affordable and inclusive child care within high quality learning environments.
- Promoting the unique linguistic and cultural elements of New Brunswick communities.

The full report is available at: [www.mwmccain.ca](http://www.mwmccain.ca).