

## **National strategy for early years required**

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SAINT JOHN - Philanthropist Margaret McCain is calling on the federal government to create a national early childhood development strategy for a public system that will give children a better life start.

"It's absolutely necessary," she said, in an interview.

Through the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation, McCain and her late husband have donated millions to early childhood education in Canada and the subject continues to be one of her great passions.

On Friday, she visited the Early Learning Centre in Saint John, one of the early childhood development sites in the province that has benefited from her generosity and expertise. The centre, located at St. John the Baptist-King Edward School in the city's south end, is a facility where preschool-age children attend early childhood programming. It's in its fourth year of operation.

McCain would like to see this type of facility used as a model for others across the province and the country. "We want to change outcomes for New Brunswick and to benefit New Brunswick, it has to happen throughout the province," she said.

McCain pointed to how Canada lags behind other countries for child care and outcomes for children according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

"You should see the countries ahead of us in terms of outcomes - Cuba is ahead of us," she said. "Forty-two per cent of Canadians are functionally illiterate, 60 per cent in New Brunswick. But Cuba has one of the highest literacy rates in the world." The former New Brunswick lieutenant-governor said Canada need only look to the Nordic countries, where early childhood development has been part of a public system for more than half a century to see the benefits of early childhood development.

"It's extending the education system downward ... we're not talking about putting children at desks," she said. "It's experiencebased learning or purposeful play." Janet Towers, the project manager at the Early Learning Centre in Saint John, said the facility is providing a vital link between early childhood and the school system. "Literacy begins at an early age so investing early is crucial," she said.

The facility works in partnership with various community organizations, including the Family Resource Centre, the Boys and Girls Club of Saint John and the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI).

McCain's dream is to see early childhood education centres such as this one as much a part of the public system as the one-year parental leave.

They would "fill the gap between the end of parental leave and the school entry," she

said.

McCain's work in domestic violence, specifically as the founding member of the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Foundation, led her to an interest in early childhood development in the mid-1990s and the work of Dr. Fraser Mustard, a world renowned expert in the field who died in 2011.

"He gave me a mission,"she said.

Since then, McCain has been working tirelessly to bring cutting-edge research in the area of early childhood development to the forefront. McCain said Canada has come a long way in recent years when it comes to research and programs for young children.

In New Brunswick, there have been requirements for additional trained staff, a curriculum framework has been developed and there have been increased investments in early learning, she said.

The province has also hired early childhood education directors in all of the districts and McCain said there is movement "towards building a provincewide system" in New Brunswick.

"The will is there,"she said.

McCain and her family foundation are working on developing a business plan to help the province's early learning sites become sustainable.

"What we're really doing is trying to build capacity to expand the reach of early learning to all New Brunswick children that's the goal and to work with government until it's embedded into public policy,"she said. McCain said research has shown that early childhood development programs that merge education, daycare and family support are what children need for "optimal" development.

"The reason for this is that we know what children need a lot more than we did than when I raised my kids about the need for stimulation,"she said.

And this means, McCain said, children are "much better off in a high-quality early learning centre" - instead of at home - and that has been a tough sell for some and a cultural shift is needed to make that leap. "Change doesn't come easily and it's costly too, although we're (the foundation) going to help them do it in a cost-effective way,"she said.

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