

Dear Premier MacLauchlan, honoured guests, I would like to begin by recognizing the contribution of CHANCES to PEI children and their families and by acknowledging the longstanding partnership between CHANCES, the Government of PEI and the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation. It is our pleasure to work with you.

Jane's presentation highlights the realities of today's rising generation. Theirs is the first to spend a large part of their early childhood outside the family home. At the same time, neuro-scientific research is demonstrating how environments in the earliest years of life are critical to every aspect of human development. But what about those children who rarely make it outside their homes; those whose parents are not in the workforce for a multitude of reasons?

These are the children most often overlooked by early years interventions. They may receive some attention through home visiting programs as infants but then literally disappear from their communities until seen again at Kindergarten. Not all, but many are the children who are assessed by their teachers as lacking the physical, social, emotional or cognitive skills necessary to keep pace with their peers. Despite costly interventions by their schools, many never catch up.

This sad reality was the genesis for phase two of our partnership with CHANCES -- to find the ways to bridge the gap between home visiting and kindergarten with a high quality preschool program for children who have no other route to participation.

We were motivated not only by a desire to support individual children but to test if regular participation in preschool would help all children arrive at school ready and eager to participate.

We worked with researchers and government officials to develop the backstory – to link the databases that would allow confidential tracking of children and their progress.

We worked with CHANCES staff to develop and test tools to improve the quality of the programs because enrolling children in early childhood education is not enough. Access without quality is no ramp to equality for vulnerable children.

Here I must digress for a moment. You have no doubt read the report by a trio of

economists alleging that Quebec youth are more criminally inclined because of their exposure to preschool. We don't have the time here, but in reviewing the responses of other economists, and criminologist, and statisticians, I can confidently conclude that what we have is a tract developed out of ideology, if not outright mischief, rather than scientific evidence.

But the respondents all raise a similar point; Quebec relies too heavily on untrained child minders and profit-motivated providers to care for its youngest. In doing so, it is losing out on many of the benefits of its sizeable investment in child care. This is a challenge many policy makers face – how to expand access to preschool programming while maintaining quality.

This is what we set out to answer in this phase of the work. We knew it wasn't enough to have more children participate. The program had to be good if children were to benefit. This is why quality tools were developed and tested. They are not the private property of CHANCES. They are available to all early years programs on the island and I hope the Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture will take advantage of these resources.

In closing I would like to point out the opportunity afforded by the people of PEI and by voters across Canada. We have a new government in Ottawa with a lot of promises to keep. Among them is the commitment to work with the provinces to develop a new framework for early learning.

PEI is well place to take the national stage and be first to announce it is ready with a made-in-PEI plan to provide every child - regardless of their parents' workforce status - with an equal opportunity to participate in quality early education.

With a plan like this, rather than tying for first place on the Early Childhood Education Report, I can see PEI moving ahead and overshooting the top. Because when every child in PEI has the chance to the best she can be; PEI will be the best it can be.

*Charlottetown, PEI. November 3, 2015*