

We Are Stronger Together Conference

Best Start Network of Simcoe County

Key Note: Margaret McCain

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My initial collaboration with Dr. Fraser Mustard was in 1999 when we produced the first *Early Years Study*. In it we documented the brain drain that occurs every time a child is denied the conditions that allow her to thrive.

We used the new neurobiological findings showing the link between conditions in early childhood and future learning, health and behavior to call on governments to invest at least as much in the education of preschoolers as we devote to school age children.

The evidence stimulated popular research such as Toronto First Duty to demonstrate the effectiveness of integrated early learning and care. It gave birth to new tools including the Early Development Instrument to monitor young children's well-being at school entry. The Science of Early Childhood Development and the Centre for Excellence were founded to produce online resources where educators and parents can access the latest in the science in an accessible format. It became a motivator for federal-provincial agreements for a pan-Canadian early learning program – which lasted two short years until it was terminated by the Harper government.

In turn Fraser and I learned from all this activity and in 2007 – *Early Years Study 2* pulled from these new learnings to recommend the

alignment of early years programming with publicly funded education.

By *Early Years Study 3* we are able to point to the benefits of Quebec's child and family system, to Early Years Centres in Prince Edward Island, full day learning in Ontario and projects amalgamating early years services throughout Atlantic Canada.

The latest edition of the Early Years Study is the result of a collaboration between eight foundations from across Canada. We came together around a cause that is fundamentally progressive -- a game changer -- to make early childhood education available to all children from age 2. Early education for all would be publicly funded, available, top-quality and voluntary.

The research is overwhelming and consistent. Good education, begun early, can improve every child's chance of success. It is fair. It works. It is affordable. It enjoys widespread popularity, and we are already well on our way in Canada to making it a reality.

Early education for all is not a utopian fantasy particularly if it built on the existing asset we have in public education. With less effort than starting a whole new social program from scratch, education can expand to bridge the gap between parental leave and formal schooling. By including the option of extended-day, year-round activities, Canada can have its long-demanded early learning and child care program.

Early childhood education is not - as many have asked me -- about sitting 2-year-olds at desks. It's about purposeful play, guided by caring

professionals, knowledgeable about how young children learn and develop.

Stable, middle class families clamour for this kind of program because they know good early education can change the course of their child's life. The impact is greater still for youngsters from poor and broken homes, who have fewer chances of making it without help.

Early childhood education for all cannot happen without substantial public investment and public oversight.

This is why the focus is on education. Of course families need other supports. And in this regard we are making progress. Our health care system provides universal pre- and postnatal care. Babies are screened at birth and newborn home visiting is widespread. It is between the end of parental leave and the beginning of schooling that public policy is confused.

There are great organizations doing great things for kids. But they accommodate only a few fortunate children. The rest must make do.

Indeed there are so many fingers in the early years service pie that it's difficult terrain for parents to navigate. And it's difficult for service providers as well. Many struggle with scant infrastructure support, tenuous funding and with few incentives to find and keep qualified staff.

In fact early years services in most provinces look like chaos.

I want to share the story of a young mother because she says it best:

*I am a mother of three. If you asked me a year ago if I was a good mother, I would have said, 'probably not a good one'.*

*Last summer my worker told me that my children had to attend daycare to help them get ready for school. ....*

She goes on to say that she went to the early childhood centre in her local school to get her social worker “off her back” but what she found there surprised and pleased her. She was welcomed, respected and made to feel useful. She and her children have attended ever since. The school is one of the demonstration sites we support in partnership with the government of New Brunswick. It is modeled after Toronto First Duty to pilot the integration of early education, child care and family supports.

*The best part, the mother goes onto say: Is we no longer have to take a bunch of buses for all of the kids' appointments. It felt like we were always running from place to place. A lot of times I just cancelled because I was too tired. Now all our appointments take place at the centre. I don't miss them anymore.*

According to the case file this family was well supported – the family had been assigned a social worker, there was a speech therapist, an

occupational therapist, a psychologist. But for all the help, this mother received she didn't feel anymore competent in her parenting. She felt watched, judged -- a failure. This is not atypical of what we offer families in experiencing difficulties. And these are the ones who are receiving our attention. What about the all the children who are on waiting lists for services or those deemed 'good enough'?

Investigations into early childhood and family support programs reveal thousands of stories like these. Every province has a variety of programs but they are fragmented in ways that reduce their effectiveness in supporting family life, healthy child development and the transition to school.

Early Years Study 3 makes a very strong case for a universal platform to support early child development as a key to a healthy and just society. This approach is firmly anchored in the growing evidence from many research fields. Integrated knowledge about early human development, from epigenetics to education, should be the basis for all public policy and programs.

In asking education to take the lead we are not denigrating the contributions of the health, family support or the child care sectors to children and families. Rather, we start from the considerable international evidence in choosing education as the base upon which to grow an early childhood system. Education is unambiguous. It is about children—all children. From this universal and well-established

platform, we can develop a modern understanding that learning begins at birth, continues throughout life and involves the whole family, the whole community.

With education there is no need to reinvent the wheel— schools are in every neighbourhood -- not just some. And education already comes with a strong infrastructure -- financing, training, curriculum, data collection, evaluation and research.

In Ontario this is all well documented in the report to the Premier by Dr. Charles Pascal: *With our best future in mind*. Charles' report is about far more than full day kindergarten – although that is often forgotten. In it he provides a strategy to transform Ontario's service patchwork into a child and family system covering children from prenatal to adolescence. He advocates that the wonderful infrastructure we have in our neighbourhood schools be dragged from the agrarian into the modern age . Operating 183 days a year isn't good enough. They need to be centres of healthy activity from early morning until evening and open year round. Because this is the way today's families operate. Charles also warned against a piecemeal transition predicting the problems we are now too familiar with as full day kindergarten rolls out without simultaneous plans to transition childcare and other family related programming.

Expanding education's mandate to include young children isn't about pushing academic demands down and abandoning the care and

nurturance which is the domain of early childhood education; rather the research shows that incorporating early childhood education into schools can have a transformative impact, turning them into vibrant family centres that welcome children and families before, during and after the school bell rings.

But a question remains: can we afford it? Now we have all heard the Perry Preschool story that tell us every dollar spent in early childhood pays back \$7 in adulthood. We have all seen James Heckman's beautiful curve. But today I want to tell you a Canadian story. It is not a simulated economic model but a true-life documentary directed by economists at the University at Montreal.

Dr. Pierre Fortin and his colleagues set out to answer if more mothers were working because of Quebec's low cost early childhood education and care program.

They found that between 2000 and 2008:

- 70,000 more Quebec mothers entered the workforce because of low cost child care. These are mothers who faced barriers that would have prevented them from working with affordable care.
- When you work, you pay taxes. And these mothers do. **\$1.5-billion and mounting.**
- Their earnings raised their family income, so they are no longer eligible for some income-tested supports. As a result the Quebec government has saved \$340-million annually in social payments.

- These mothers have boosted Quebec's GDP by \$5-billion.

And that's not all. Quebec mothers have:

- Moved Quebec from the bottom to the top in female labour force participation in Canada
- Halved child poverty rates in the province
- Reduced the number of lone parent families on social assistance from over 90,000 to under 45,000
- Boosted fertility - more Quebec moms are having their second ,third and more children
- Meanwhile, Quebec student test scores have moved from below to above the national average and now stand in second place.

Quebeckers are showing that done right -- early education, when it is combined with child care pays for itself.

- *For every dollar Quebec spends on early education and care, it collects \$1.05 in increased taxes and reduced family payments, while the federal government get \$0.44 "for doing nothing".*

What is fascinating about this story is it doesn't deal with a few dozen children in a random control study. It is the story of **tens of thousands of children** and their families. And it shows that we don't need to wait decades to realize the benefits of investing in early childhood, the payback is immediate.

But despite Quebec's amazing story, other provinces have been slow to



observe and learn. The majority of provinces and territories, including this one, now provide full day kindergarten – a very positive move. But when kindergarten isn't coupled with extended day options that support parents to work, those immediate benefits -- to children's seamless experiences, parents' piece of mind **and** provincial revenues – don't materialize.

In developing Early Years Study 3 we found that more children are involved in early education than ever before – over half of 2-4 year olds now regularly attend, compared to fewer than a quarter in 2006 -- public policy remains confused. Oversight and delivery remains chaotic negating the wonderful payback that comes from delivering early education so it simultaneously supports children's learning and their parents' work. And although more attention is focused the all-important question of quality, the education of our youngest is still too often an after-thought.

This is why our foundation, the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation will continue to support the work of academics at the Atkinson Centre at the University of Toronto to further the development of the Early Childhood Education Index as a way to measure progress in early childhood systems development. The Index wasn't developed to judge or discourage. It is a tool to guide public policy towards smart investments that produce the best results.

Getting there takes the leadership of senior levels of government. Only they have the authority to merge the alphabet soup of services parents must navigate. It will also take the cooperation of service providers and other stakeholders to move beyond the status quo. It does take more than good will and coordination. We must re-engineer how we deliver programs. It's hard work, but it *does* work.

And we do have close to home examples of those who are taking on the challenge and getting results.

Thank you.