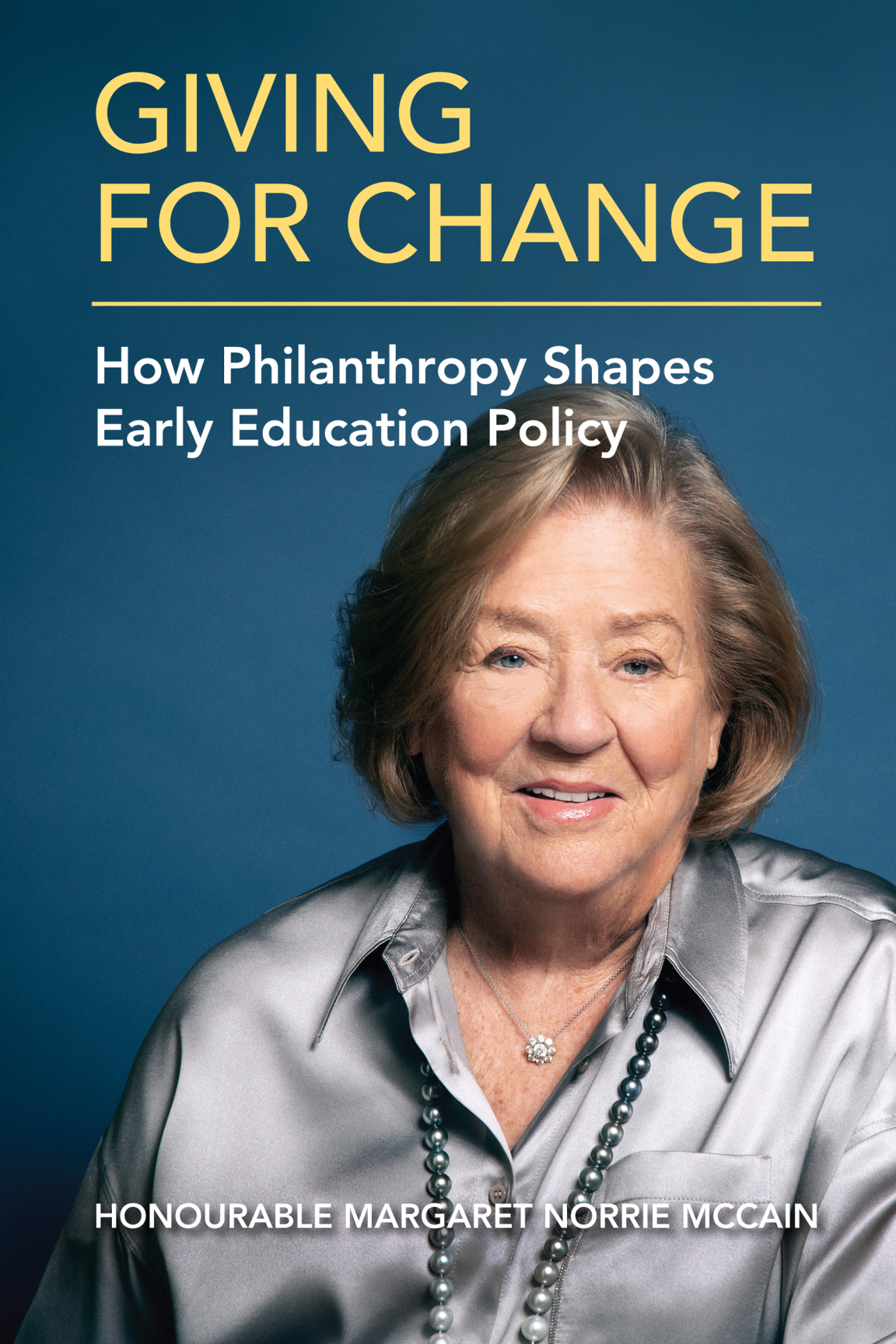
GIVING FOR CHANGE

How Philanthropy Shapes Early Education Policy



HONOURABLE MARGARET NORRIE MCCAIN

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How Philanthropy Shapes Early Education Policy

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The book is dedicated to children—
whose boundless wonder reminds us of the magic
in every moment. You are the heart of this journey.

To families—who shape the world one hug,
one bedtime story, one shared moment at a time.

And to educators—the guiding hands and
gentle hearts who show up every day to inspire and
champion the youngest among us.

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Foreword

People often ask me to define the "secret sauce" behind our foundation—what drives it and fuels its unwavering commitment to early childhood education and care. This book is an attempt to answer their questions. The truth is, there is no single ingredient behind Canada's advances in early learning and child care, nor a solitary architect. This journey has been shaped by generations.

My mother's generation fought to preserve wartime day nurseries, appalled that a country would ask women to step up in times of crisis only to cast them aside once the crisis passed. My own cohort stood behind the bold recommendations of the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women, whose defining call to government was a national childcare program. Years later, the trailblazing Justice Rosalie Abella, who wrote the federal legislation on employment equity, crystallized the urgency, calling child care "the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers."

These demands never faded. Women's organizations, children's advocates, early childhood educators, researchers, business leaders, parents, and grandparents—through persistence, argument, and unrelenting pressure—helped bring us to this moment.

Credit must also go to Prime Minister Trudeau and his team for their skill in persuading the provinces and territories to adopt the national early learning plan.

There is never a final word when it comes to the essential and evolving issue of early childhood development. Children's needs, the research that informs our understanding, and the policies that shape their futures must keep pace with an ever-changing world. The challenges we leave them are formidable—social polarization, climate change, global fragmentation, and widening economic disparity. Yet one truth remains constant: our responsibility to ensure that the youngest among us are equipped with everything they need to rise to the moment.

Margaret Norrie McCain
Chair Emerita
Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc.

ONE

In the Beginning

In the mid-1950s, a young man from rural New Brunswick invited a young woman from rural Nova Scotia for a 10-cent coffee. This led to more dates where they shared their hopes for the future. His dream was to start a business of his own. The following year they married, and soon after returned to his home community of Florenceville. Together with his brother, they launched a business venture from the product of the land—the lowly potato. They built what is now a multinational frozen food corporation, and it all started because they liked French fries. That young man was my husband.

I was married to Wallace McCain for 56 years. He gave me love, a family, and a life. Another man gave me a mission: Fraser Mustard, my mentor for nearly 20 years. They both died in 2011, within a few months of one another.

In many ways, they couldn't have been less alike. Wallace was a successful businessman with an East Coast affability, adept at making friends out of strangers. Fraser was a physician and medical researcher who showed more patience with his cats than he did with people. But they shared the same worldview, one that I had also inherited from my parents: People privileged with education, good fortune, skills, and influence have a responsibility to make the world a better place.

My father, James Paul Norrie, was a renowned geologist and mining engineer who was inducted into the Canadian Mining Hall of Fame. A prospecting adventurer, by official accounts he founded more gold mines in Canada than anyone before him. He also found ore in northwestern Quebec, a mica mine in Ontario that supplied the Allies during World War II, and pitchblende at Great Bear Lake, where uranium was later discovered. He was the first deputy minister of natural resources for Nova Scotia, started a drilling company, and managed mines in the United States and Canada.

To me, he was dad. His first wife, Hanna Grace Hartling, died at age 33, leaving four children under the age of 10 years. He entrusted their care to his parents. Grandma Norrie was enormously cruel and abusive, and those sad little children spent eight long, loveless years in a hate-filled house. I never knew the woman, but every time I think about those poor waifs, I am filled with sorrow and fury.

My father's oldest daughter, Pauline, was a student at Mount Allison University in Sackville, Nova Scotia. Dad asked Pauline to visit him at his mining camp for the summer but instructed her to bring a companion. A work camp in the Quebec bush, occupied by men who hadn't seen a woman in months, was no place for an unaccompanied teenage girl. She chose Margaret Fawcett, 28 years old, unmarried, and an assistant dean of women at Mount Allison.

I don't understand why my future mother agreed to act as an impromptu governess. She probably felt sorry for the sad little Pauline. Amidst the black flies and awful accommodations, the young university administrator and the 41-year-old geologist fell in love. I was born in October 1934, nine months after their honeymoon. I was named Margaret for my mother, but to this day, everyone calls me Margie. The family settled in Colchester County, Nova Scotia, where our family of five children soon became eight.

I was 11 when my father died in 1945. He was 54 years old. My mother smothered her grief by pouring herself into every possible social justice cause, from agriculture and health care to education reform; she even stopped a bulldozer from tearing through a woodland preserve. She managed all her political and social work while running a dairy farm. The worst crime in Mother's book was apathy—you must not look away from injustice.

She used her community activism to run for public office in Nova Scotia. Her first federal try was for the Liberal Party of Canada against Robert Stanfield. It wasn't surprising that she was nominated for a riding she couldn't possibly win, but Mother knew it was a start to taking women's representation seriously. In 1972, Pierre Elliot Trudeau named her to the Senate of Canada. She died in 1983 at age 77, lauded by many of the same men who had fought every progressive cause she had championed in her lifetime. People today barely understand or appreciate just how hard my mother and other women like her fought for equality.

This book isn't an account of my life. I share my origin story to explain why Fraser's message—early childhood experiences shape lifelong outcomes—resonated so much with me. I was already primed to be an activist, and now I had been given the scientific rationale for why children need to be loved and encouraged.

Meeting Fraser

My first lesson from Fraser was no treat. We were both guests in the mid 90s at the house of Dr. Robin Armstrong, president of the University of New Brunswick. Fraser was then head of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, or CIFAR, as it was universally known. Robin was one of the scholars on the CIFAR team. Russ King, New Brunswick's minister of health, was also invited. Fraser was travelling the country, taking the early child development message to all who would listen.

There I was, seated at the table with the minister and the academics, while Mrs. Armstrong served the meal. I didn't have a clue what they were talking about. I felt so ill-informed that I couldn't even formulate an intelligent question.

How to measure social gradients? As far as I was concerned, a gradient was the steepness of the hill I was about to ski down. That summed up my knowledge of gradients!

As the lieutenant governor of New Brunswick, I was not unfamiliar with gatherings of high-powered people. Yet I kept asking myself, "Why am I here?" I hate feeling stupid, and I left that luncheon feeling stupid. Typically, when you parted company with Fraser—after he had pontificated for a while—he left you with a stack of reading material. I took my homework to Florenceville for the weekend and read and read.

It was because of my advocacy against family violence, which I knew was

a huge impediment to healthy human development, that the information sunk in. Fraser kept plying me with studies. A book by Dr. Bruce Perry, *Incubated in Terror*: *Neurodevelopmental Factors in the Cycle of Violence,*[1] opened my understanding. Some of it was highly technical, but I got the gist. I began sharing the information with anyone who would listen.

I started hosting dinners at the lieutenant governor's residence. I provided good food and wine, the essential ingredients for stimulating conversation, and seated a deputy minister, a researcher, and a minister, hoping that the academics would convey the evidence to the policymakers. The government of Frank McKenna became well-informed about the social determinants of health.

Shortly after, I was invited to give the keynote presentation at a conference discussing children at risk for violence. Academics, social workers, and ministry people from across Atlantic Canada and as far away as Ontario were in attendance. I was unaware that Fraser Mustard would follow me as a speaker. If I had known he was in the audience, I doubt I would have had the nerve to tell his story of how early childhood experiences affect the developing brain with lifelong consequences. However, I did, bringing it down from the stratosphere where Fraser presented and translating the information into language that front-line practitioners could use. Fraser was impressed, delivering his rare and highest praise: "You get it." Furthermore, I could explain it to everyday people. He loved that.

Reversing the Real Brain Drain

My involvement in Fraser's crusade took off while developing what became the first *Early Years Study* (EYS). Fraser's ideas found their way into the Ontario Conservative Party's Common Sense Revolution manifesto. After the Tories were elected in 1995, Fraser grew impatient waiting for action on early childhood. He wrote to then-Premier Mike Harris, and in 1998, the premier commissioned him to conduct an in-depth study.

It had a compelling mandate:

> *The study will provide options and recommendations with respect to the best ways of preparing all of Ontario's young children—including those at risk or with special needs—for scholastic, career and social*

success. The development of the whole child, giving consideration to a comprehensive model of seamless supports and early interventions, is of paramount importance. Further, the Study will clarify roles and responsibilities and recommend options for collaborative service models for early learning for children, including local and provincial-level initiatives based on best practices.[2]

Fraser, being Fraser, had conditions. He wanted a reference group and a woman co-chair. He put my name forward, and I was surprised that the government accepted his recommendation. I was a former lieutenant governor appointed by a Liberal government and my political leanings since leaving office weren't a secret. Still, Fraser got his way.

He also handpicked his reference group, including Terrence Sullivan, a visionary in healthcare delivery; Dan Offord, a pioneer in children's mental health; Charles Coffey, a vice president at the Royal Bank; Clara Wills, an advocate for children with special needs; and Mary Gordon, the director of parenting centres in Toronto schools.

The government also had its nominees for the committee. It was here that I met Dr. Robin Williams, the newly appointed medical officer of health for the Niagara Region. Jane Bertrand, a professor of early childhood education at George Brown College, was brought on to coordinate the research. Jane would become a dear friend, a close confidant, and an indispensable advisor to my family's foundation.

CIFAR members Clyde Hertzman and Dan Keating, leading experts on the social determinants of health, along with renowned economist Elhanan Helpman, also supported the committee. Richard Trembley brought in a considerable trove of Quebec studies. The research was well in hand, but we recognized the importance of speaking directly with families and providers of children's programs. Scores of individuals and groups were consulted.

Jane encouraged us to spend time with Carol Gott, a young social entrepreneur. Carol's frustration with the scant services available for young families in her small community of Feversham, Ontario, led her to establish her own. The siloed approach to program delivery in rural and remote areas, where work is seasonal and the population sparse, made it nearly impossible to establish and sustain services. Carol demonstrated how flexible models, capable of providing a continuum of services for

families as their children grow and their needs change, could better serve more families in preferred ways. Additionally, an integrated model proved to be more cost-effective. Carol and her Rural Voices for Child Care greatly influenced our final recommendations.

Siloed service provision was also a problem in urban communities. Officials would list multiple programs for young children, leaving the impression that families in a particular neighbourhood were well served. Then providers would tell us about their budget worries, never knowing if their funding would be renewed, and constantly needing to fundraise to address gaps. Parents were often unaware of the services in their community, or they would find a program only to have its mandate or hours change, or for it to disappear without explanation.

Fraser was adamant that the study should discuss early brain development. He wanted to elevate the science that underpins the critical importance of early childhood experiences and their powerful lifelong influences. Some in the reference group questioned whether a thesis on neurons, synapses, and brain plasticity might alienate readers. Instead, we argued that science would bring early childhood to important audiences who were unaware of it.

Cheryl Hamilton and Dorothy McKinnon were brought in to write up the findings. Jane and Dorothy spent many late evenings with Fraser revising and re-revising over takeout dinners.

Early Years Study Challenges

The debates within the reference group could be heated. Some wanted our recommendations to prioritize home visiting, while others wanted family drop-in centres. Fraser championed his positions by repeating his arguments for centres maintained by volunteers, each time with more volume. It was left to me to say, "Fraser, we *hear* you. We just disagree with you." Everyone laughed.

While progress was being made at our table, relationships with the government officials assigned to our work became increasingly strained. Fraser and I met with Margaret Marland, then-minister for children's services. During one meeting, she asked the staff to leave and questioned whether we were receiving the support needed to complete the report. Fraser replied, "No, we're not," and outlined the roadblocks we faced, including threats that the government would not publish the report or

would refuse to translate it into French unless our recommendations were altered.

The bureaucrats had three big problems with our central proposals. First, we stated that services must be universal—available to everyone. While a larger portion of children living in lower socioeconomic circumstances may be vulnerable, the greatest number of vulnerable children live in middle-income and even wealthy families. Socioeconomic status alone does not dictate children's outcomes.

However, some officials remained strongly wedded to targeting, where the poor and beleaguered—and deserving—are identified to receive a "hand up." Needing to disclose a deficiency to receive support is demeaning to the individual and is antithetical to our goal of improving outcomes at a population level.

Second, many in the reference group wanted to build on the assets Ontario had in its public schools. The vision was to open education to children in their earliest years and encourage schools to become familiar with and respond to incoming cohorts. However, government officials adamantly refused to support anything that they believed might increase the influence of the teachers' unions.

Third, the prevailing attitude at Queen's Park was ABC: *Anything But Childcare*. The government had already reduced the scant support it provided to licensed centres and had attempted to dismantle formal child care completely by redirecting public funds to parent vouchers. For these officials, there was no need for "care" in child development.

In the end, Fraser threatened to publish and release the report independently: "I don't give a damn. I was asked to do it, and they're going to get it whether they like it or not."

The Early Years Study: Reversing the Real Brain Drain[3] was released on April 20, 1999. We could not have found a better tagline to capture the angst of the time. The media was filled with stories of CEOs and high-profile names fleeing Canada for bigger opportunities and paycheques in the United States. At the launch, we challenged officials to do the math: "What costs more? The emigration of a handful of Canada's top talent or the wasted potential of millions of young minds?"

Premier Harris seemed to embrace the report, writing to Fraser, "I am committing this government to do everything it can to get Ontario's children off to the strongest possible start in life."

Implementation Task Force

A task force established to implement the study's recommendations floundered out of the gate. Margaret Marland was replaced by John Baird, who directed the establishment of children's centres, one for each of the 64 provincial ridings. These were essentially clearing houses for children's services and activities, often built on the backs of existing family resource programs, which were consolidated and rebranded.

The province gave $10 million to Invest in Kids, a charity known for dispensing parenting information, to undertake a public awareness campaign. It would create posters featuring cute babies sitting in egg cups or strolling through fields of daisies. All the children were white, the settings were unrealistic, and the messaging was largely uninformative.

The founder of Invest in Kids wanted Fraser and me to be trustees on its board. We joined and tried to work with them, but their insistence on placing their logo on everything made collaboration difficult. I recall a meeting at the York Club, a private social club located in a historic building in downtown Toronto. The location might have reflected the convenors' relationship with the topic. Someone used the term ECE, referring to early childhood educators. The meeting chair asked, "What's that?" I suppose those who exclusively use nannies haven't encountered an ECE.

The break came when the organization was set to release billboards with words like "rapist," "killer," "suicidal," and "drug addict" in bright red lettering splashed across pictures of babies. For them, this illustration of predeterminism encapsulated the brain story. In other words, they completely misunderstood it. I was horrified and demanded my name be removed as a trustee. Thankfully, the Boston Foundation, one of their major funders, intervened and the posters were pulled.

Invest in Kids did evolve. Carol Crill Russell left the Ministry of Children to take over its research arm. She contributed significantly to translating the science of child development into practical tools for parents and caregivers.

The task force's next initiative was Ontario's Promise to Kids,[4] which mirrored America's Promise. The red wagon, associated with Colin Powell, was intended to symbolize the collective effort needed to support children. The underlying message was that children are the responsibility of their parents. Higher levels of government, those

with the financial resources and policymaking tools, would fund advertising campaigns.

Fraser and I joined the Ontario Promise board. It was an absolute, total, and complete waste of time. Not a single person had a clue about early childhood education—or any education for that matter. Instead, they were all focused on making money and promoting big names. We lasted one meeting.

My final break with the government's task force came in 2003 when the Ontario government phased out Grade 13 as part of its "educational reforms," which actually centred on slashing school budgets.

Eliminating Grade 13 wasn't a terrible idea. In fact, it was among the recommendations of the 1994 Ontario Royal Commission on Learning[5] led by Gerald Caplan and the Honourable Monique Bégin, a politician and feminist scholar whom I greatly admired. The key aspect of Monique's proposal was to phase out Grade 13 and reinvest the savings in schools to provide integrated early learning alongside childcare services for all children starting at age 3. Ontario lost Grade 13, causing significant disruptions for high school students, while our youngest learners never received the comprehensive program envisioned by the commission.

Follow-up Report

Angered by the government's inaction and inability to break with targeted programs, we released a follow-up report in 2002, *The Early Years Study: Three Years Later.*[6] To dispense with any ambiguity about what we meant by our original proposal for a "comprehensive system of Early Childhood Development and Parenting Centres," we called for publicly funded preschools built onto the existing public education system to create a more cohesive and comprehensive approach to early childhood development.

Preschool would be voluntary and open to all children aged 2 to 5 years. Extending education to younger children was not far-fetched. Free education was already well established when children turned 6, so why not start at age 2 when the benefits are so much more pronounced, as our evidence proved?

Our study featured an analysis of the economic benefits of early childhood education. It demonstrated how public investment in early

learning and care would be recovered in both the short and long term by decreasing social costs and broadening the tax base from working mothers.

The message attracted influential Canadian voices. The Governor of the Bank of Canada, David Dodge, pointed to Canada's declining birth rate and supported investments in early childhood to ensure that every child reaches their potential, thereby boosting productivity in a shrinking labour force.

A few years later, in 2005, economists James Heckman and Flavio Cunha produced that beautiful curve showing the rate of return for every dollar invested across the life cycle. Money spent on young children is returned eightfold in better educational outcomes, higher adult earnings, and reduced social costs. Later remedial interventions are more difficult and significantly more expensive, highlighting the importance of starting early and providing ongoing support over time.

The study also had international ramifications. Financier and philanthropist George Soros credits Fraser and the *Early Years Study* with his decision to invest $100 million in early childhood programs, teacher training, and curriculum development in post-Communist countries. Soros deeply understood the need to tackle inequality through early education if democracy was to take root in Eastern Europe.

Back in Ontario, soon after our follow-up report was released, Harris resigned, and Ernie Eves assumed the premiership. Any pretense of a commitment to our study and its recommendations quickly faded.

Impact of the *Early Years Study*

But the story doesn't end there. The *Early Years Study* wasn't fancy looking, but it was powerful, punching against the mindsets shaping policymaking in Ontario and beyond at that time. The EYS has had an enormous legacy because we were not prepared to let it become another warmly received, then quietly shelved treatise. Instead, Fraser and I shopped its message around to every available audience.

It turns out that Fraser was right: The brain story did open doors to boardrooms, government offices, and international bodies. Once inside, Fraser would literally bang the table to tell seasoned legislators and CEOs that they "got it all wrong."

Rob Santos, a long-time and brilliant fixture in early childhood policy

in the Manitoba government, recalls our many visits there: "Fraser was well respected and listened to. Margie complemented him, softening his message and creating channels to influence people on how to apply what he was saying. Fraser would bust down the doors, and then Margie would get people onside."

I was the clean-up girl who smoothed ruffled egos so they could absorb the message. Our contrasting styles somehow worked.

The *Early Years Study* provided the scientific rationale for investing in young children. It has altered how children, their educators, and even scientists are taught. It has spawned a myriad of resources. Most significantly, its evidence—establishing early childhood as the foundational stage of human development—has led to policy changes that continue to transform the lives of young children.

Regional and Provincial Response

Many acted in response to the EYS's call to action. Among the first was Charles Pascal at the Atkinson Foundation. He assembled a roundtable to generate ideas in anticipation of the report's release. The resulting Million Dollar Early Years Challenge would help produce Toronto First Duty. First Duty demonstrated in real time how to integrate Kindergarten, child care, and parenting supports. The City of Toronto also supported the initiative. Toronto mayor Olivia Chow, who at that time was a councillor and the city's children's advocate, somehow managed to wrangle another $4 million from the cash-strapped city.

With additional funding from the Atkinson Foundation and the Canadian Autoworkers Union, the Toronto District School Board and selected childcare agencies established five sites. Their mandate was to model holistic, integrated, school-based early childhood programming. Certified teachers and early childhood educators worked together as a team, employing a consistent play-based approach to learning and behaviour guidance. All children had the option to attend for the full school day, with modest parent fees charged for additional hours.

Researchers at the University of Toronto monitored the development of the model, conducting a comprehensive assessment of its impact on children, parents, educators, and administrators. Their results showed that children who entered Grade 1 after two years of full-day programming were better prepared for school. More children were diverted from

special education classes. Parents were able to start jobs or avoid shift work, which can be disruptive to family life. Additionally, the integrated model proved more cost-effective, serving a greater number of children and families than traditional siloed programming.

Toronto First Duty became the forerunner to Ontario's two-year Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK) program, which the government of Dalton McGuinty rolled out beginning in 2010. Now attended annually by 260,000 4- and 5-year-old children, independent evaluations[7] show that children who participate have advanced literacy and numeracy skills and are better able to self-regulate. Self-regulation, the ability to control impulses, maintain focus, and manage emotional responses, is essential to learning, well-being, and healthy relationships. Ontario's FDK has inspired look-a-likes across Canada.

Together with the early years studies, Toronto First Duty anchors the mission of my family's foundation. We work with governments and communities to demonstrate the possible. We have kept pace with the burgeoning evidence, producing another three early years updates.[8] Through action and words, we continue to bring the child development story to new generations of community providers, researchers, policy-makers, and corporate thinkers.

National Impact

During the early 2000s, when the study was making little headway with the Ontario government, it was having an impact at the national level. In 2001, just two years after its release, the federal finance minister phoned to tell me he was introducing a "Children's Budget." He wasn't exaggerating. Budget 2001 expanded parental leave, increased family payments and health care for mothers and babies, and targeted funding for child care and family support. The wording for the announcement expanding parental leave from six to 12 months was lifted directly from the *Early Years Study*.

Twenty years later, on the eve of Budget 2021, I got another call—this time from the minister for families. He told me to listen for my name in the federal finance minister's upcoming address to parliament. Fraser and I were mentioned, but more important was the multi-billion-dollar investment in early learning and child care.

Our foundation's central message over the years has been the need for

substantial public investment in young children. In 2020, we quantified this need in *Early Years Study 4*.[9] Collaborating with leading economists, we calculated the cost of the first phase of a universal early learning and child care system for Canada.

We urged governments to spend wisely and strategically. Fraser and I had set out to redefine early childhood programs not as "babysitting services for working parents" but as the first tier of education and development that lays the foundation for future success. This message was echoed in the 2021 budget address that unveiled the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care plan.[10] The announcement repeated our message that "early learning is at least as important to lifelong development as elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education." Canada's early learning plan is expanding daily, offering children the foundational experiences they need to acquire the skills essential for the future.

Post-Secondary Education and Resource Development

Another product of the first *Early Years Study* was the establishment of the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development[11] at the University of Toronto. We recommended that universities develop a reciprocal relationship with practitioners to link research to best practices and ultimately influence policy. The call resonated with the Atkinson Foundation, which endowed an academic chair at the university and established an enduring partnership with the School of Early Childhood at George Brown College. The college not only graduates early childhood educators but also directly operates a dozen model early learning and care centres. These centres act as laboratories to pilot effective approaches to early learning.

Other actions flooded out of the study. The *Early Childhood Education Report,*[12] introduced as part of the third *Early Years Study* in 2011, continues to monitor the funding, policy, access, and quality of early education programs across Canada's provinces and territories. It is a resource for policymakers and advocates to ensure that progress is monitored and continuous improvements are made.

The EYS advocated for early human development to become mandatory learning in every post-secondary discipline. The Science of Early Child Development[13] at Red River College produces a curriculum tool that is employed across different fields of study and worldwide.

The Offord Centre created the Early Development Instrument to address the need for a population-level assessment of child well-being linked to neighbourhood socioeconomic status.[14] This critical tool tracks the impact of political commitments and exposes inequities between groups and regions, supporting policymaking across Canada and internationally.

Parents, educators, and government officials require reliable, easy-to-use reference tools about child development. The Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development,[15] supported by researchers at the Universities of Montreal and Laval, became that resource.

The EYS dismissed the notion that the economy was the only reflection of a nation's status. Fraser furiously advocated for a Human Development Index,[16] which was created as an alternative to the traditional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and adopted by the United Nations. The index considers the environment, access to health care, educational opportunities, and a decent standard of living to be key to democratic preservation.

The EYS's findings were also integrated into the World Health Organization's 2008 report on the social determinants of health, *Closing the Gap in a Generation*.[17] Fraser was again on the dais, driving home how early experiences affect neurobiological pathways that influence physical and mental health, learning, and behaviour throughout the life cycle.

The straightforward yet compelling assumption presented in the early years studies—that permanent and sustainable change can only happen through public policy—is now widely acknowledged. Even the World Bank advises governments that "investing in the early years is one of the smartest things a country can do."[18]

TWO

Giving for Change: Demonstrating the Possible

Wallace and I would sit at our kitchen table several times a year to decide on our charitable giving. At first it was straightforward: donate to causes we cared about. Sometimes it was a new university building, a scholarship, or an academic chair, but after seeing the transformative power of the *Early Years Study* I knew we could aim higher. What if our giving didn't just support what was but helped shape what could be? That question tested and motivated me in equal measure.

I've always believed that philanthropy carries both privilege and responsibility. Having the resources to make a difference is a privilege, but with that comes the responsibility to act wisely, strategically, and with humility. Yet my humility was tested the day Nova Scotia's new premier, Darrell Dexter, asked me if I thought mothers should be paid to stay home.

For a moment, I was speechless—not out of anger, but surprise. He was a New Democrat and too young to hold such an outdated notion. I thought of all the women I'd met over the years, brimming with

potential yet burdened by barriers they didn't create. "Mr. Premier," I said, steady but firm, "that train left the station long ago. It's time you got on board."

His cabinet, full of strong women, exchanged glances that said more than words ever could. I could feel their frustration—a frustration that I shared. But it also reinforced a lesson I've carried with me: Change doesn't happen because one person has a good idea. It takes persistence, collaboration, and sometimes patience to walk people through the train station and point to the tracks.

Embracing the Early Years

Wallace and I wanted our philanthropy to be a family effort to give back, particularly in Atlantic Canada. We felt a strong connection to the region and wanted to return some of what it had given us. We polled our four children, each inspired by different missions: health care, mental health, family violence, and education.

Facilitators were brought in to help workshop ideas. By this time, I had been schooled through two editions of the *Early Years Study*. I knew that closing educational gaps and improving health and social behaviour were most effective in the earliest years of children's lives.

The deciding moment came when Jane Bertrand, who had worked with us on the early years studies, presented six simple slides. We were all captivated by how she connected quality early childhood education to societal progress: stronger children, empowered mothers, more equitable communities, and an economic return to boot. Wallace leaned over and whispered, "Can we hire her?" That day determined the purpose of our foundation. We weren't just funding programs; we were building the foundation for generations.

Focusing the mandate of the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc.[19] around early childhood education felt natural. With my background in social work, I had seen firsthand the cascading effects of inequality on families. With his business acumen, Wallace understood the importance of staying focused and setting achievable goals. We both believed that addressing inequality in the earliest years wasn't just compassionate, it was also smart.

Lessons from Collaboration

The Toronto First Duty (TFD)[20] project became our blueprint for change in Atlantic Canada. It was a masterclass in how to work within the public education system to create something transformative. We toured many premiers, education ministers, and Atlantic activists through the First Duty site at Bruce Junior Public School in Toronto's east end, an example of how presenting evidence takes many forms.

Between 2009 and 2020, our foundation would support early years demonstration sites integrated into public schools, providing early learning, child care, and family support in dozens of communities across New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. We also helped Newfoundland realize full-day Kindergarten and pre-Kindergarten.

Fraser's idea to develop an early childhood index to track progress on early childhood education across Canada became an important tool, although creating it fell to Jane Bertrand and Kerry McCuaig. On its first release in 2011, the *Early Childhood Education Report* (ECER)[21] caught the attention of many premiers. They didn't like the ranking system or where they fell on the roster. But our calls offering to help them do better were promptly returned.

The process also taught me something fundamental about leadership: No matter how talented a minister or activist might be, progress hinges on the premier. Without the top person's buy-in, change grinds to a halt.

We won't work in a province without the agreement of the sitting government. This does not imply that we endorse a specific party or politician. In fact, we have successfully collaborated with parties across the political spectrum. While meeting and working with government officials, we also engage with opposition parties because, although governments may change, the needs of children and families for quality early years services do not.

Whether it was the NDP government eventually agreeing to pilot demonstration sites in Nova Scotia or the subsequent Liberals expanding the model province-wide, we approached every partnership with the same philosophy: We're here to help, not to take credit. As I often tell premiers, "This can be all yours. But if anything goes wrong, we'll take the hit."

Building Evidence for Change

I often joke about how I depend on my Google Ladies, Jane and Kerry, who constantly arm us with data, insights, and strategies. But making strategic change isn't just about numbers; it's also about telling a story that policymakers and the public can trust.

Another valuable lesson about the power of evidence is that the more local the data, the better. I've struggled through many conversations with various premiers where I'm told that the fantastic outcomes of Quebec's low-cost child care plan "could not work here," or that Toronto First Duty was too "Toronto." I didn't bother to mention the success of early childhood education in the Nordic countries since their eyes would have glazed over.

Even the best randomized controlled studies were not good enough for some individuals. Instead, they needed proof that the proposal would work in their region. This is why we attach rigorous evaluations and communication plans to all our initiatives.

Our foundation funded the Nova Scotia site evaluations and brought in experts to help train staff who were being asked to work in totally new ways. June McLoughlin, a leader in innovative early education models in Australia, toured the province with Jane and Kerry, meeting with officials and education leaders. Years later, people still tell me how June opened their thinking to the multitude of ways early childhood centres could be more dynamic and responsive to children and families.

The benefits were reciprocal. June credits Fraser with transporting the lessons from Toronto First Duty and the early years studies to Adelaide, Australia. In 2007, Fraser was appointed the "Thinker in Residence" in South Australia as part of a unique government program designed to bring in global experts to advise on public policy. Jane made several trips Down Under, crisscrossing the country and sharing her unique knowledge of integrating children's services into public education. Fraser was also highly influential; his efforts led to various reforms and initiatives, including Australia's $9 billion investment in early childhood education.

June described how service providers are adopting an approach that spans from pre-birth to adulthood. "It's all about engaging with those who often don't engage with the system," she recently told me. Some Australian states have also implemented a junior Kindergarten program,

which will soon include 3-year-olds. "All of this reflects what is happening in Canada and the influence of your foundation," she said, illustrating the value of international partnerships and how we learn and build off one another. We can't underestimate how important that is.

Pre-primary in Nova Scotia

The Nova Scotia project established Early Years Centres in eight neighbourhood schools, focusing on providing multiple services to children and their families. These centres became intervention hubs that were open to all but aimed at levelling the playing field for the most vulnerable children.

Evaluating the demonstration sites created a relationship that still endures between the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and brilliant academics from Mount Saint Vincent University. The foundation funded the research, but we didn't just hand over money—we "gave them" Jane and Kerry. They always accompany any grant we offer. And let me tell you, their expertise, shaped by years of experience both across Canada and internationally, is worth far more than any dollar amount.

Together, we documented the impact of integrating early education into the school system on program quality, children's outcomes, and the feasibility of scaling. This evaluation not only shaped the program but also became the cornerstone of our argument to Premier Stephen McNeil's incoming government, persuading it to continue the demonstration sites and expand the model province-wide.

Premier McNeil reflected on those early conversations: "You and your team educated us and armed us with the arguments to defend the investment. There were critics, but the evidence gave us the confidence to face them."

Karen Casey, the education minister who expanded the pilot sites into today's universal pre-primary program, underscored the significance of the demonstration sites, especially in rural areas where most 4-year-olds had limited access to support. "The evidence from those centres solidified our conviction," she said. "We showed the public that every child deserves this opportunity, regardless of socioeconomic status or community."

By 2025, pre-primary education in Nova Scotia served nearly 7,000 children—85% of the province's 4-year-olds—facilitating their transition into formal schooling.

The collaboration with Mount Saint Vincent University serves as a valuable resource, fostering research that continues to influence policymakers. Dr. Jessie-Lee MacIsaac, a rising star in policy research, oversees a hub supported by our foundation. "We've established a network that links research to practice, not only in Nova Scotia but throughout Atlantic Canada," she stated.

Former Premier McNeil perhaps said it best: "Pre-primary is part of our legacy. We didn't think of it that way at the time, but looking back, I'm proud. Among all our investments, this one has the potential to make the greatest impact."

Sharing Nova Scotia's experiences through regional conferences and roundtables encouraged provinces to collaborate, strengthening the broader system. Karen Casey added, "Atlantic Canada is so small; we observe one another. I knew our neighbours were looking to us, inspired by the evidence we'd gathered."

CHANCES: PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

When we first partnered with CHANCES,[22] I had no idea how deeply their work would touch the lives of families in Prince Edward Island—or my own heart. We had remarkable allies in director Ann Robertson, an innovative social entrepreneur, and Verna Bruce, the chair of the CHANCES community board and a retired deputy minister with a warm personality and a strategic mindset.

CHANCES was already on its way to integrating early years services when we first met with Ann and Verna. As the largest childcare provider on the Island, it offered home visiting and parenting support, with many of its facilities already located in schools. All of this, combined with their willingness to innovate, made them perfect partners. Beginning in 2009, we embarked on a 10-year journey to explore the effects of expanding access to high-quality early childhood services, particularly for families who needed it most.

The idea was simple: Give children a head start by removing barriers to early education. The project's first phase focused on making early childhood education accessible and integrated with family support. We

funded 15 hours a week of free programming for children from age 3 until they started Kindergarten. These hours were carefully designed to nurture language, social, and thinking skills.

We focused on families ineligible for existing government subsidies: those whose parents weren't in paid work or full-time school. It was unfair and contrary to the evidence to exclude the children simply because their parents didn't fit the mould. Our grant stepped in to bridge the gap, and the response was overwhelming. Every family offered the program accepted, and most children remained in it for the entire three years. That simple act of opening the door to opportunity changed lives in more ways than we could imagine.

The children's progress was extraordinary. Their confidence grew; they found their voices, and they developed the social and cognitive skills that made the first day of Kindergarten less daunting and more exciting. When we talked to the parents, their stories brought the data to life.

One mother shared how the program had helped with her mental health and strengthened her bond with her children. Another parent said the routine of preschool helped her create a routine for herself—something she hadn't realized was missing.

Many parents used the newfound time to search for work, care for younger children or elderly parents, or attend to their own health. They also took advantage of CHANCES' other supports, such as parenting classes, where they acquired new strategies and perspectives. "It helps me at home to deal with [the children] better and to work with different situations," one parent said.

In 2016, CHANCES expanded by opening three new Early Years Centres in underserved communities: O'Leary, Belfast, and Spring Park. Our foundation supported the start-up of the centre in O'Leary, a small rural community in western PEI. I was curious to see how it was doing, and what I discovered exceeded every expectation. The centre served 75 children and employed 22 educators and support staff, transforming not only the lives of the children and their families but also the entire community. The local economy benefited from the additional income generated by both centre employees and the families who spent money at local businesses.

I was immensely gratified by what we accomplished together and even more excited about what was yet to come—but I never would have guessed it would happen so quickly. Of course, the project underwent a thorough

evaluation. Ann and Verna hosted a lunch meeting to present the findings. They chose the sunlit kitchen of CHANCES' main Charlottetown campus, a cheerful and familiar space that dispensed with formalities.

The gathering was informal, yet the attendees were impressive: the premier, the ministers of education and finance, the heads of opposition parties, business leaders, and several of PEI's academic heavyweights. I introduced the collaboration to the group and then passed the floor to Kerry, who did a masterful job presenting the findings. One bold recommendation was to expand the 15 hours of free early education for every preschool child in PEI, beginning with 4-year-olds.

We knew an election was pending, but we were surprised when, a scant hour after lunch, the writ was dropped. Conservative opposition leader Dennis King held an impromptu press conference, announcing that, if elected, his government would act on our recommendation. Dennis went on to become Premier King, and he kept his promise. Today, 80% of 4-year-olds in PEI participate in the program.

Verna would kindly say, "Margie would bring people to the table, do a wonderful introduction, and then conclude with, 'Okay, what are we going to do with all of this?'"

Indeed, something has been accomplished. PEI has steadily expanded its publicly managed network of Early Years Centres. The province has also strengthened its qualified workforce by enhancing educators' pay and working conditions, ultimately improving children's outcomes.

Thinking back, that day beautifully captures the transformative power of collaborative philanthropy. The luncheon serves as a perfect metaphor for the convergence of ideas and action. Hosting influential stakeholders in a familiar and supportive setting like CHANCES' kitchen highlights the project's grassroots efforts. It was not merely a presentation of findings but a compelling call to action, strengthened by the evidence and the shared vision of what early education could mean for PEI.

It is rare for research findings to transition so swiftly into policy. The unexpected twist of the election writ being dropped that day shows the serendipity that often accompanies meaningful change. The fact that a key policy recommendation became a cornerstone of a political campaign and later a government initiative speaks to the project's credibility and the passion behind it.

PEI's ongoing investment in early education demonstrates the impact

of aligned evidence, timing, and leadership: communities prosper, children thrive, and systems improve for the better.

New Brunswick's Designated Early Learning Facilities

Although I was born in Quebec and lived in Nova Scotia and Ontario, New Brunswick will always be my special home. It's where Wallace and I raised our family and started our business, and it's where I had the privilege of serving as lieutenant governor. So, when Premier Sean Graham asked me to be the province's advisor for the early years, I found it easy to say yes.

When I began this work, New Brunswick faced deep-rooted challenges that were hard to resolve. The population was aging faster than in any other province, the youth demographic was shrinking, birth rates were falling, and adult literacy rates restricted job opportunities for many.

New Brunswick was our first experience with integrated Early Years Centres. In 2009, the province adapted the Toronto First Duty model and identified four sites to demonstrate seamless programming for children and parents by connecting Kindergarten, child care, parenting support services, and community resources. The goal was ambitious: to study the impact on children and families and gather evidence to guide public policy.

The government funded four sites, and our foundation supported four more. The Health and Education Research Group at the University of New Brunswick led the research and evaluation efforts.

Locating early years services in schools made the difference. These school-based hubs didn't just prepare children and parents for school, they also helped schools welcome children with diverse and exceptional needs. By identifying and implementing early interventions, interprofessional teams could act promptly to address learning and social challenges in children while fostering stronger relationships with families. Parents took on more active roles in their children's education, and schools benefited from deeper connections that continued into the later grades.

The benefits extended beyond the families served. Declining student enrollment had left many schools underutilized and at risk of closing. Shuttering a school, the last gathering place in many small villages, could empty the population. Repurposing vacant classrooms for younger learners breathed new life into the schools and the community. New

Brunswick's population challenges presented an opportunity for creative, impactful solutions.

We tracked the progress meticulously. Drs. Bill and Ruth Morrison, a remarkable sibling duo at the University of New Brunswick, evaluated the sites using an innovative tool that Jane developed for Toronto First Duty called the Indicators of Change.[23] The findings[24] were striking. By integrating services, administrative costs were reduced, allowing more resources to go toward staffing and programming. The integrated staff team enabled schools to introduce pre-Kindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds and to increase licensed afterschool spaces.

From a financial perspective, consolidating multiple services under one roof reduced facility costs and enhanced accessibility. Additionally, collaboration within the educational setting improved the quality of services.

If there's one story that captures the magic of what happens when services break free of their silos and genuinely wrap around families, it's Susan's. Susan was a young mom with four preschool-aged children, three of whom faced developmental challenges. Her life was a whirlwind of appointments with psychologists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, and pediatricians. According to her social worker, Susan's family was "well taken care of," but it felt overwhelming for Susan. Each week brought a barrage of appointments, trekking four children on public transit.

"Sometimes I just didn't go," she admitted guiltily. But Susan wasn't indifferent—just exhausted.

Her social worker urged her to attend parenting classes at the early years centre in the local school. At first, Susan resisted. "I didn't want to," she confessed. "It was just one more appointment, and my school years weren't happy. Looking at the colour of the brick made me feel sick." The thought of stepping back into a school building stirred up feelings she had spent years trying to forget.

But she went, and once inside, her world began to shift. "[The staff] didn't make me feel stupid," she told the researchers. "They convinced me I was a good mom." For Susan, that validation meant everything. The practical difference was profound, too. No longer did she have to run all over the city with four little ones in tow. The interprofessional team—therapists, doctors, and others—provided their services at the school. "We don't miss appointments anymore," she said with pride.

Three years later, the evaluation team caught up with Susan and her family. The two older children were doing well in school. Susan had become a regular volunteer at the centre, a warm and confident presence who was eager to assist others.

When I think about the power of schools as a platform for service delivery, I reflect on Susan. Her story demonstrates that when we rally around families instead of expecting them to adapt to us, we not only change systems, we transform lives.

Although the project didn't achieve universal preschool, it fundamentally reshaped New Brunswick's early years sector. One significant achievement was transferring child care from the welfare ministry to the newly created Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. This structural change aligned local oversight of child care with educational districts, ensuring that regional childcare directors had a permanent seat on school administration councils.

Another cornerstone of the change was raising the qualifications of childcare staff. Before the project began, New Brunswick had some of the lowest staff standards in the country. The department launched a training offensive to ensure everyone working with young children has at least basic training. Under the visionary leadership of the late Ann Sherman, Dean of Education at the University of New Brunswick, we also launched an online Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education[25] designed for use across Atlantic Canada.

The province introduced a new designation for facilities that requires adherence to strict standards regarding parent fees, staff wages, curriculum, quality, and financial transparency. This change was led by truly brilliant department leaders who strategically and meticulously followed the evidence. In 2011, New Brunswick's early years sector ranked near the bottom in Canada according to the *Early Childhood Education Report*. By 2023, 97% of its childcare facilities qualified as Designated Early Learning Centres, and New Brunswick came out on top!

Premier Graham reflected on the early support we provided: "The evidence-based solutions were critical to me as an elected official. This wasn't just advocates promoting a pet project; it was science-based. Where the science had gaps, the foundation funded the research to fill those gaps. That made it easier for me to go back to the department staff and show the evidence. It allowed us to truly put the province on the map."

As in other provinces, our work in New Brunswick has spanned many government changes. Politically, we are agnostic. Our efforts are guided by scientific, economic, and social evidence that quality early education nurtures the skills essential for democratic societies.

Newfoundland Full-Day Kindergarten

Newfoundland and Labrador was the last Atlantic province to offer full-day Kindergarten for 5-year-olds. The consequences were visible. Developmental gaps were evident among children entering grade school. Families struggled to piece together child care for the awkward mid-day gap when Kindergarten ended. This was not just a personal inconvenience it was an economic issue.

Cathy Bennett, a business owner who depended on a predominantly female workforce, explained how disruptive the situation was for families and workplaces: "Kindergarten was the most challenging year for my employees in terms of child-rearing. Too often, staff had to leave work suddenly because their childcare arrangements fell through."

As chair of the St. John's Board of Trade and governor of the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, Cathy brought an entrepreneurial perspective to policy changes. She explained, "I knew that early learning wasn't just about education—it was about economic stability, workforce participation, and long-term prosperity."

When the opportunity arose, Cathy ran in a provincial by-election in 2014 and narrowly won. A short year later, in a general election, Cathy decisively won her riding, becoming part of the government and appointed minister of finance and chair of the treasury board.

"It wasn't an easy time," she recalled. "We inherited a financial crisis, tough decisions had to be made, and many election promises were put on hold. But one promise wasn't: full-day Kindergarten. We were determined to see it through."

"The power of research strengthened my work as a politician and advocate," Cathy recalled. "The work of Mrs. McCain and others helped me stay informed with the latest data to make the strongest case possible. When opponents challenged me, I had the facts."

Premier Dwight Ball reflected on that decision years later: "2016 was a challenging year. We had to make some unpopular financial decisions,

and our popularity suffered. However, we had committed to supporting full-day Kindergarten, and we stuck with it."

"We were told we'd see the benefits in both the short and long term. I expected long-term gains but didn't realize how quickly the improvements would appear. Everyone—parents, teachers, and principals—commented on the impact it was having on primary children. That told us that Margaret's foundation was right and that we were wise to listen to them."

The experience with full-day Kindergarten made it easy to include the early years as one of the mandated areas when the premier formed the Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes.

"When the Task Force[26] report landed on my desk, one year after the battle for FDK, recommending not only junior Kindergarten but changing the *Schools Act* to allow neighbourhood schools to offer programs for younger children, I trusted it was the right thing to do. The amazing aspect of that whole process was that no one spoke against it. Public opinion had shifted so much in one year."

The Evidence Leads

When I began this journey, I was particularly struck by one area of research: "the windows" in human development. The first 1,000 days lay the foundation for our sensory systems: sight, sound, and touch. However, the following 1,000 days are crucial in shaping our thinking, language, and social-emotional skills. The extent to which these abilities develop depends on both our genes and, more importantly, our environment.

All babies are born with similar potential, but significant differences arise by age 3 years. For instance, children from university-educated families often possess twice the vocabulary of their peers living in low-income households. This is concerning because literacy is the foundation for all learning. Developmental vulnerabilities cross all socioeconomic lines, but poverty, family violence, addiction, and mental illness compound the risks.

Quality early education can change these trajectories. It benefits all children by enhancing outcomes for those from stable homes and mitigating risks for those from challenging ones. Our home-grown research replicates major longitudinal studies showing children in quality programs are more likely to graduate, less likely to require special education, and even score a year ahead in reading by age 15.

The benefits don't stop at childhood. The Abecedarian Project,[27] which followed disadvantaged children from infancy into adulthood, revealed extraordinary results. Those who received quality early education were healthier, less likely to engage in risky behaviours, and more likely to achieve academic and professional success. By their mid-30s, none of the men in the early education group exhibited signs of chronic disease, which starkly contrasts with their peers in the control group. For policymakers concerned about the future of Canada's health care, early education presents viable solutions.

However, understanding the power of early education isn't enough. What actions should we take? Three pillars guide effective policy and practice: universal access, a strong workforce, and robust data systems.

First, access must be universal. Canada's national childcare plan has significantly reduced parent fees, but $10 a day remains a barrier for some families. All provinces and territories offer subsidies for low-income families, but subsidies tied to parental employment exclude too many children. The most vulnerable often find themselves toggling between childcare arrangements in tandem with their parents' precarious employment, missing out on stability and learning opportunities. This is why we are adamant that all 4-year-olds should have a free core day of preschool, eventually expanding to include younger children.

Second, but by no means less important, the workforce is critical. Jurisdictions everywhere are struggling to attract and retain talent. Prince Edward Island demonstrates how attention to the workforce yields results. With an ambitious early childhood agenda, the province slashed staff turnover rates from a staggering 50% to just 2% in a few short years. The key? Competitive wages and benefits, leadership development, continuous professional learning, and formal recognition of educators and their qualifications.

Finally, we need robust data collection and analysis to guide decision-making. Linking health, education, and social services information enables us to monitor children's well-being and evaluate the effectiveness of programs. I am encouraged by the efforts of New Brunswick and PEI to adopt tools for integrating data across service sectors. With this information, policymakers can assure citizens that their investments are yielding positive results, and more readily intervene where children most need help.

Reflections on Philanthropy

Philanthropy isn't easy, nor should it be. It's messy, challenging, and, at times, frustrating. It's often misunderstood as swooping in with ready-made solutions. In reality, it's about listening, learning, and collaborating with communities and governments to build lasting change.

Governments operate under immense pressure, including short election cycles, tight budgets, and constant public scrutiny. A single misstep can jeopardize careers or undermine trust in public institutions, leaving little room for risk-taking. In this environment, caution often wins over innovation.

Verna, chair of the CHANCES board in PEI, knows this from experience: "Governments don't have resources to experiment, and the public doesn't want government experimenting with their tax dollars. Therefore, it doesn't have the flexibility, authority, or nimbleness to try different approaches. McCain could stay the course, allow events to unfold, compile the findings, and then present them to the government."

As foundations, we can experiment, test new approaches on a smaller scale, and demonstrate their effectiveness before scaling up. It's not just about funding projects; it's about creating a bridge between the unknown and the possible, providing governments with a roadmap informed by real-world experience. Foundations have the privilege of taking risks. Our work has never been about replacing government; instead, it's about strengthening it. However, humility is essential. Real, sustainable change doesn't come from charity. It requires public systems to take ownership and expand these ideas.

When we funded early years sites in Atlantic Canada, we asked stakeholders to embrace something new. At that time, integrating child care, early learning, and family support within schools was not universally accepted. However, by taking the lead, we gave governments the confidence to adopt and expand these programs, knowing they were backed by proven results.

The pre-primary program in Nova Scotia is a perfect example. By piloting those eight sites, we created a testing ground for integrated early-learning models. The emerging evidence influenced provincial policy and inspired neighbouring provinces to explore similar initiatives. Karen Casey, the education minister who championed the program,

once told me, "You made it easy for us because we could see the results before we leaped."

With freedom comes responsibility. Philanthropy requires fostering collaboration through listening to communities, partnering with governments, and ensuring that innovations remain sustainable. For me, this has always been at the heart of our mission—not just sparking change, but ensuring it endures.

THREE

Building the Case: Finding the Voices

I have always believed that investing in young children is one of the most powerful ways to shape the future. Like my mother, I have spent much of my life championing women and their rights. But I'm also a pragmatist. Although early childhood education is a central concern for women and their children, it's also an economic issue.

The men in my family encouraged me to build the economic case for greater investment in early education. My son Scott would say we had to show the payoff if we wanted governments to write bigger cheques. Educational and social development evidence was foundational, but as businesspeople, we knew that financial arguments and voices were essential.

My partnership with Fraser set the stage for engaging influential men. I knew politicians would listen to him, so I deliberately brought others to the table to push for policy change. This wasn't about gender—it was about strategically elevating voices that could make an impact. When I encountered a business leader interested in early education, I cultivated that connection, helping them tell the early childhood education story in a compelling new way.

Giving high-profile men a platform moved young children off the women's pages and into the financial section. Fraser was the first, but two economists, Pierre Fortin and Craig Alexander, also shifted the conversation. Business leaders began to listen. Pierre and Craig deserve enormous credit for their game-changing contributions, but their influence took root because we saw an opportunity and pursued it. The lesson? Timing and strategic positioning matter.

The Economic Rationale

Craig Alexander was a pivotal figure in this effort. Jane, Kerry, and I first met with him in 2012 when he was the chief economist for the Toronto Dominion Bank. We went into his office on a mission to bring a major bank into the early childhood tent. He asked thoughtful questions, and we provided extensive background research. The resulting document, *Special Report: Early Childhood Education Has Widespread and Long-Lasting Benefits,*[28] replete with the TD logo, still resonates.

As Craig recalled, "My 2012 report garnered substantial media coverage and led to meetings with senior government officials and elected politicians—the power of the argument laid in its credibility. The foundation recognized that getting the private sector, industry leaders, and people beyond the usual early education advocates involved would drive real attention and action. Soon, other senior bankers, not just advocates, were calling for investment."

He credits the foundation with mobilizing the message: "Our audience quickly became diverse: sector stakeholders, corporate leaders, and politicians—all listening. The economic argument, backed by data on return on investment, provided local champions with a new way to make their case. It gave business leaders a reason to advocate for early learning. I wove it into broader discussions about Canada's economic challenges, building a more prosperous nation, labour supply, and population demographics."

The change was evident at a breakfast presentation we arranged in Halifax. We brought Craig to present before business and policy leaders across the Maritimes. A whole new audience sat up and listened. Craig made a compelling argument that investing in the early years was a strategic move to stimulate the economy. It became a "wow" moment.

According to officials, in the days and weeks following that breakfast Craig's data surfaced in policy briefings, cabinet papers, and ministerial speeches. The conversation shifted—not just about child care, but about social and economic development and provincial growth. When the new government took office in 2021, the investment in early childhood education was never questioned.

Meanwhile, next door in New Brunswick, Nicole Gervais, the dynamic director of early childhood development for the province, was observing a similar trend. Shifting the conversation toward the return on investment in early childhood education was gaining traction.

Recognizing the opportunity, the foundation commissioned a socio-oeconomic analysis of childcare investments in New Brunswick.[29] We then arranged for Craig and Pierre Fortin to meet directly with key ministers—especially those who were skeptical—to present the findings.

Beyond government meetings, the foundation met with influential industry leaders and community stakeholders and held a series of public presentations. "We came to understand that to change the system, we needed to convince senior ministers and engage the broader province. These efforts were pivotal, ultimately shaping the transformation of New Brunswick's approach to early childhood education," Nicole recalled.

Craig's evidence was built on the arresting Heckman curve,[30] which readily shows how the return on investments peaks in early childhood and diminishes over the life course. Two renowned American studies, the Perry Preschool[31] and Abecedarian[32] projects, informed Heckman's analysis. These carefully controlled longitudinal studies examined the potential benefits of early childhood education for children living in highly vulnerable circumstances. They continue to yield impressive social and economic returns.

There was reasonable skepticism as to whether these findings applied to Canada. However, as early as 1998, economists Dr. Gordon Cleveland and Dr. Michael Krashinsky at the University of Toronto demonstrated that for every dollar invested in high-quality child care for the general population, there was a $2 return through increased maternal labour force participation and benefits for children.

Dr. Clyde Hertzman at the University of British Columbia explored how early education influenced population health outcomes. Jack Shonkoff advanced the powerful "pay me now or pay me later" argument,

emphasizing the importance of investing in early childhood to avoid the long-term costs of adversity. Charlie Coffey, a vice president at the Royal Bank, used his business credentials to create platforms for these brilliant minds to share their evidence. Even David Dodge, then head of the Bank of Canada, was on board to make the case for public investment being directed toward the very young.

The Quebec Story Changes the Conversation

As important as all this literature was, these were economic models—good on paper, but would they deliver in the real world? Yet, right in our midst, we had a made-in-Canada early learning and childcare experiment that had been operating for over a decade. Quebec's low-cost childcare program was incredibly popular with families, but it remained relatively unknown outside the province beyond a few dedicated advocates. If it came up, policymakers and pundits outside Quebec would write it off as a misguided attempt to boost the province's French-speaking population.

It would take Pierre and his team of economists to illuminate just how much the rest of us were missing by ignoring Quebec's social miracle. But before I get to Pierre's contribution, I must tell you how we met. As I've mentioned, ours was a small foundation, and while we could only do so much, we knew we weren't alone.

Across Canada, many foundations were invested in early childhood development. Fraser and Clyde Hertzman made several attempts to bring them together. Some came and went, but by 2009 we had a solid core of eight foundations[33] committed to working together to promote quality, publicly funded early childhood education for every preschool-aged child in Canada. The group coalesced around developing the third *Early Years Study,*[34] conducting public opinion research, and releasing a series of open letters on the value of early childhood education and the importance of targeting adequate funding for not-for-profit growth.

All these foundations did remarkable work, but it was impossible not to be impressed by the progress in Quebec and the influence of the Chagnon Foundation. The Chagnon team was a powerhouse of brilliant, charismatic individuals, overseen at the time by Jean-Marc Chouinard. We were still in the early stages of getting to know one another when Chagnon hosted everyone at their offices in Montreal. That's where we first met Pierre and another outstanding influencer, Camil Bouchard.

As a professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Camil was commissioned to write a report on how to improve children's lives; *Un Québec fou de ses enfants!*[35] (*A Quebec Crazy for its Children!*) was released in 1991. The catchy title underscored the fundamental truth that every child needs at least one adult who is utterly devoted to them. Camil's report urged Quebecers to meet the needs of their children with equity, generosity, and compassion. His stirring call to action galvanized children's activists, served as a blueprint for policymakers, and, in 1997, sparked the beginning of the early education and care program that would transform lives across the province.

Academics from many disciplines tracked the outcomes of Quebec's childcare initiatives, and the results were nothing short of extraordinary. Within the program's first decade, Quebec vaulted from the bottom to the top on numerous social indicators. Once trailing the rest of Canada in female labour force participation, the province now led. Where Quebec women had once been less likely to pursue post-secondary education than their counterparts elsewhere in Canada, they now dominated. At the same time, student scores on standardized tests rose from below the national average to above it.

Despite working more, Quebec women also had more babies. Quebec dads also became more engaged in child-rearing. A staggering 82% took paid parental leave after the birth of their children, compared to just 12% of fathers in the rest of the country. And because early childhood programs enabled mothers to contribute to the family income, Quebec managed to slash child poverty rates by 50%.

Finally, in an analysis that caused a paradigm shift and captured attention everywhere, Pierre's team demonstrated that the tax revenues generated by mothers who entered the workforce, thanks to low-cost child care, covered the entire cost of Quebec's system. No longer could early education and care be dismissed as an expensive perk; it was an economic powerhouse.

The Chagnon Foundation marked the 20th anniversary of Professor Bouchard's report in 2012, an event that coincided with the release of *Early Years Study 3*. Though nearly two decades apart, both documents made a compelling case for why policymakers should prioritize young children.

Standing up to Misinformation

Despite the program's solid popularity in Quebec, cracks began to appear. Long waitlists for childcare spots frustrated parents, while vulnerable families were often bypassed or left with lower-quality care. Meanwhile, for-profit child care expanded rapidly, overshadowing the Centres de la petite enfance (CPEs), the publicly managed childcare network originally envisioned to serve the province's families. Critics seized on these growing pains, using them as ammunition to declare the plan a failure.

In response, the association representing CPEs launched a public investigation into the state of Quebec's childcare services. This effort culminated in a declaration, signed by 31 influential organizations, calling on the government to build a universal, high-quality, public/non-profit early years system aligned with public education. At the 2017 Montreal Summit on Early Childhood Education, which launched the declaration, I took the stage to push back against the skeptics.

Around this time, the federal government was cautiously stepping into early learning and care through bilateral agreements with the provinces and territories. Detractors wasted no time in attacking the initiative, amplifying the flaws in the Quebec model as reasons to steer clear of it. Some critics, unsatisfied with factual shortcomings, resorted to pseudo-science, fabricating absurd claims by suggesting, for instance, that Quebec babies were less attached to their mothers or that Quebec teenagers were more antisocial.

It was no coincidence that the Fraser Institute—more aptly named the Fiction Institute—chose the moment the federal government was rolling out its early learning plan to attack Quebec's cost-benefit analysis. Fortunately, we had a powerful ally in Pierre, whose economic expertise dismantled the Fraser Institute's claims with evidence and logic.

Working alongside our Quebec colleagues was a highly rewarding experience. The collaboration was rich, the learning mutual, and the impact far-reaching. It was gratifying to hear that they felt the same.

Ongoing Research

Pierre's research was invaluable. We were eager to give him as many opportunities as possible to share his findings, and he, in turn, was always generous with his time. "I was supported in doing presentations across

the country on the Quebec experiment," Pierre would later recount. "There was keen interest in what was happening in Quebec. What made those presentations forceful was that I knew there was backing for the ideas I was promoting, and that support came from Mrs. McCain and her foundation."

Jean-Marc Chouinard, at the Chagnon Foundation, recalled when the foundations first met to form the Early Child Development Funders Working Group. "What stands out most is the graciousness, the authenticity, and the sensitivities with which we were hosted," he said. "I've often shared how rare that experience was—to have a real interest in what is happening in Quebec. McCain created the conditions to ensure that openness happened. It put us in a position where we all could learn and share."

Unveiling the economic benefits of early education was not a one-and-done operation. We stayed attuned to the progress, ensuring the work continued to evolve. Craig's seminal work with the TD Bank was followed in 2017 by *Ready for Life*.[36] As labour shortages and inequality became government priorities, Craig, now chief economist at the Conference Board of Canada, set out to quantify the link between early education and its labour market impacts. His updated economic argument highlighted the long-term social and financial costs of inequality. Like his TD brief, *Ready for Life* gained traction.

"I met with federal and provincial officials," he recalled. "The message resonated. First, because it was clear and because people were more aware. The groundwork laid by the McCain foundation was evident."

Our Partnerships: Transforming Evidence into Policy

Any success we've had stems from our commitment to gathering evidence and transforming it into actionable public policy. We don't just collect data—we follow it. We seek out researchers to expand on existing knowledge and connect their findings to real-world applications. We fly them around the country to ensure their discoveries are widely shared. Their work translates complex findings into accessible language and demonstrates how it can be applied to local contexts.

Even the most accomplished academics choose to work with us, knowing their research will make a difference. Dr. Carl Cotter led the multi-year evaluation of Toronto First Duty, a model for integrated

early childhood services that resulted in early learning opportunities for hundreds of thousands of children across Canada. As he explained, "I've spent 50 years in academia, and most of my work was read by students and fellow scholars. It was difficult to gauge its real impact on children's lives. McCain showed how research could be directed at policy and program issues, ultimately improving the lives of children and families. The foundation has provided an incredible gift—turning evidence, research, and thoughtful analysis into meaningful action. Before McCain, much of this research remained untouched on library shelves."

We also seek out new researchers who hold promise. I first met Dr. Jan Pelletier as a young academic eager to explore the connection between brain research and early human development. "Your support of my work, and all of us in early childhood research, provided a foundation that allowed us to continue. It encouraged collaboration on the science of early learning and took us into schools, where we worked directly with children and families," Jan told me.

Jan's research documented the enduring benefits of two years of Kindergarten's play-based learning on academic success in middle school. Her findings played a crucial role in preserving full-day Kindergarten in Ontario when a change in government threatened its survival.

Another young researcher I have enjoyed working with is Dr. Jessie-Lee McIsaac. We are a strong advocate for her work at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax. "The foundation was instrumental in helping me gain footing as an early-career academic who does research that informs policy decisions. The support allowed me to build relationships within Nova Scotia and across the Atlantic provinces," she said.

One of the flagship projects led by Jessie-Lee is Building Atlantic Connections. It brings together governments, academics, and communities to share insights from data and parallel practices. The goal is to ensure high-quality, inclusive, and culturally responsive early childhood programs. Beyond policy research, the findings inform educator practice, ensuring that research translates into real change for children, families, and educators.

Providing Accessible Resources

A long-time partner and effective knowledge translator, the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development is a free, reliable resource designed

to make the latest scientific knowledge on early childhood accessible to everyone, including parents, service providers, policymakers, and researchers. Supported by an amazing team at the Université Laval and Université de Montréal, it brings together insights from top international experts on child development. Easy-to-read summaries and "Eyes on…" information sheets break down complex research into clear, practical insights. This resource is all about making high-quality early childhood knowledge accessible to those who need it most.

Another route to bringing timely research to the public is through *The Conversation*. A nine-country network, our foundation supported the 2017 launch of this independent source of news and views in Canada. *The Conversation Canada*[37] teams academics with experienced journalists to translate their research into accessible, engaging articles for a wider audience. It takes research off the shelf and puts it into the hands of people who can use it.

Articles published on *The Conversation* don't just stay on the platform. They are distributed without charge across mainstream and alternative media, ensuring that reliable, research-backed information reaches people in a timely and impactful way. Through *The Conversation*, Canadian researchers engage with over a million readers each week, demonstrating the powerful reach of well-communicated science.

Creating Government Connections

Even when the evidence is compelling, it can still be difficult to sway those with ideological resistance or vested interests. Angela James, a gifted communicator with a deep understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing, exemplifies the resilience and vision needed to overcome these challenges. We featured her work in *Early Years Study 4*. *Becoming a Capable Child*[38] bridges Indigenous and settler early-years curricula, making those connections vivid and actionable.

As the director of early education for the Government of the Northwest Territories, Angela was tasked with overhauling early years programming. She doesn't believe in small adjustments—Angela thinks big. Her vision was to bring universal early learning and child care to the NWT's vast geography and diverse population.

Wanting to explore the feasibility of her ideas, she reached out to us. We turned to Jane and Kerry, who assembled a team from the Atkinson

Centre to conduct a cost-benefit analysis[39] tailored to the region. Their report, presented to the Legislative Assembly, laid the foundation for a series of interdepartmental initiatives to improve children's outcomes, with junior Kindergarten as a cornerstone.

Almost immediately, there was opposition from some quarters and children's service operators who feared that junior Kindergarten would undermine their business models.

"We endured relentless challenges and opposition over implementing JK in the NWT," Angela reflected. "In the end, it was a success, largely thanks to Kerry and Jane. Through that whole experience, I made some incredible friends in Ontario."

Junior Kindergarten in the Northwest Territories is a success story. The latest educational outcomes report confirms that JK is boosting children's academic success. It is a well-earned legacy for Angela, who continues to champion Indigenous knowledge and early learning in her current role as president of Aurora College.

Monitoring Leads to Action

These achievements did not happen in isolation. They were bolstered by a growing national understanding of early learning's impact, reinforced by research and policy efforts. One key tool in maintaining the momentum has been the *Early Childhood Education Report* (ECER).

The ECER has played a significant role in this awareness, monitoring progress and tracking change. It has fostered a national sense of vigilance to strengthen the early learning sector. The ECER isn't just about generating knowledge; it engages stakeholders in and outside government in ways that change practice and perspective.

Jean-Marc described its influence in Quebec: "The ECE reports made us feel part of a national network. For Quebec, it was important tactically, positioning our experience within a more global perspective. Initially, our high standing in the ECER gave us a sense of security—we thought, 'We're good.' But as the years passed and other provinces began catching up with our ranking, we started having our own internal reflections. We looked at governance, the number of private settings, and the quality of educator training. The ECER named these issues and lent new voices to growing concerns. It gave us new material to advocate for improved services. We had initially focused on increasing access, but the time

had come to turn our attention to quality. McCain gave us the voice to push in that direction."

Dr. Jean Clinton, a leader in the vanguard for children and a brilliant knowledge translator, has also found the ECER essential in her work. She explained: "The reports are absolutely a go-to for those of us on the frontlines advocating for change. They are a source of information we depend on. Canada has become the North Star for early learning because of the foundation."

The late Charles Pascal, a formidable force on the policy stage, also recognized its usefulness: "The ECER provided evidence on the pace of change, comparing the provinces and holding up examples of good policy. It was just brilliant and leading-edge. It put some provinces in the position of having to defend where they stood compared to others, proving that stronger policies were possible. It got the provinces talking to one another, sharing ideas and plans."

The ECER, now housed at the Atkinson Centre at the University of Toronto, was shaped by policy lessons from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s 20-country review of early childhood education and care. The OECD provided a roadmap for improving early learning systems worldwide. The authors noted the lack of a standard monitoring mechanism across Canada's 13 provinces and territories. To fill this gap, and at Fraser's urging, the ECER was developed and released in 2011 as part of *Early Years Study 3*.

The ECER establishes benchmarks organized into five categories: governance structures, funding levels, access, quality in early learning environments, and accountability mechanisms. The rankings, which are released every three years, are determined collaboratively by researchers and provincial and territorial officials. They reveal both progress and areas for improvement.

The ECER is independent, beholden neither to governments nor sector organizations. This makes it an honest broker, able to provide an unabashed assessment of the status of early learning and child care across Canada. Tove Mogstad Slinde, the former head of the OECD ECEC Network, the international body that keeps governments abreast of evidence-based policy solutions, recognized the ECER's influence: "It has been inspiring to see how the quality indicators contained in the ECER can fuel discussions among the provinces on how to proceed."

Those at the forefront of policymaking also rely on the report as a guide. Former PEI Premier Wade MacLauchlan provided insight into how it was used by his government: "Reports like the ECER always get the attention of political leaders—not because it will score you extra points in the horse race or get media coverage, but because when you're leading a jurisdiction, you are constantly making choices about priorities."

"Our benchmarks dovetailed with those in the ECER," MacLauchlan continued. "The government made some big changes and started to get good grades on the ECER, which we ran with. We knew we couldn't build the workforce, keep young families in the province, and attract others unless we had the full package to support them."

Philanthropy's Role in Policymaking

Philanthropy plays a role in shaping policy, but it's certainly not the only factor at play. Our foundation isn't government—something we always keep in mind. Governments are filled with dedicated career professionals who deeply understand their areas of expertise, bringing data, research, and analysis to policymakers. But outside perspectives, like ours, can also add valuable insight.

The Honourable Ahmed Hussen, the federal minister who reached the agreements that formed the Canada-wide child care plan, understood how to balance all the voices offering input. As he put it: "It was also important to hear from groups like McCain in gathering an outside perspective to complement what we were hearing inside government and to acquire a regional flavour for our diverse country. The foundation was extremely critical to better understand how we had to adjust those agreements to get deals done in parts of the country that had unique circumstances. Mrs. McCain was very aware of regional nuances, which became so important to us in getting those deals signed."

As Deputy Minister of Finance, David Dodge was very interested in the early years, their link to lifelong health and well-being, and what governments could do for families with young children. He said: "The work of the foundation was important in helping create the preconditions inside the government that are required to make movement on these files possible. It informs the public and makes arguments generally acceptable. Over the years, it has provided a steady and impressive body of work that everyone became aware of—governments most certainly."

I believe philanthropy plays a singular role in this area. Government research funding understandably follows the immediate interests of the government, and academic research can lack application. Conversely, philanthropy can and does develop lines of research that may not be pursued otherwise.

Without a strong foundation of data and analysis, decisions are made in a vacuum, often failing to address long-term societal needs or creating harmful unintended consequences. Dr. Steven Barnett understands this dilemma. For decades he has tracked preschool policy in the United States as head of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University.

Barnett noted, "There is a very strong tilt in government policy toward quantity over quality without regard to the impacts on children and whether programs achieve their potential. One of my recovering politician friends calls this the 'peanut butter problem.'" As he explained, this is where politicians spread initiatives as thinly as possible to cover the most possible voters at the lowest cost.

When governments do this, they need to be challenged. As the Canada early learning plan develops, we must remind policymakers that affordable child care for parents does not mean cheap early learning for children.

The foundation's research plan follows four lines of evidence. The early years studies provide the science, the demonstration sites show what is possible, the ECER monitors progress, and the economic studies we support provide the metrics necessary for governments, institutions, and advocates to drive real, measurable change.

Communication is the essential fifth arm to champion the story of early childhood. Continuously monitoring progress, identifying gaps, and sharing best practices fuels the momentum needed for transformation. It ensures that policies are not just well-intended but are also effective, leading to tangible improvements in education, social equity, and economic prosperity.

The role of research in shaping the future of early learning remains more critical than ever. The past has shown us that knowledge is power—but only if it is constantly refreshed and we choose to act on it.

An interview with *Bloomberg Business News*, 2014.

During a series of meetings with government and business leaders in Fredericton, New Brunswick, September 26, 2019. Minister of Health, Hugh Flemming; Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, Dominic Cardy; Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Jake Stewart; Partner and Chief Economist, Deloitte Canada, Craig Alexander; Chair, Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc., Margaret Norrie McCain; Premier, Blain Higgs; President of JSM Capital Corporation, and CEO of the Saint John's Sea Dogs, Scott McCain; Vice Premier and Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, Robert Gauvin; Minister of Women's Equality and Service New Brunswick, Sherry Wilson; Minister of Environment and Local Government, Jeff Carr.

With Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe, June 6, 2019.

Receiving the Honorary Doctorate in Philosophy, the highest honour bestowed by the University of Laval, with the university's rector Sophie D'Amours, June 16, 2019. Dr. Michel Boivin is standing behind Ms. D'Amours.

With Steve Paikin on TVO's *The Agenda*, March 11, 2020.

With economist Dr. Pierre Fortin during conference break
in Québec City, 2019.

Margaret with Kelly McLean-Haley at the opening
of the new preschool in Centreville Community School,
Centreville, New Brunswick, June 14, 2013.

REVERSING THE REAL BRAIN DRAIN

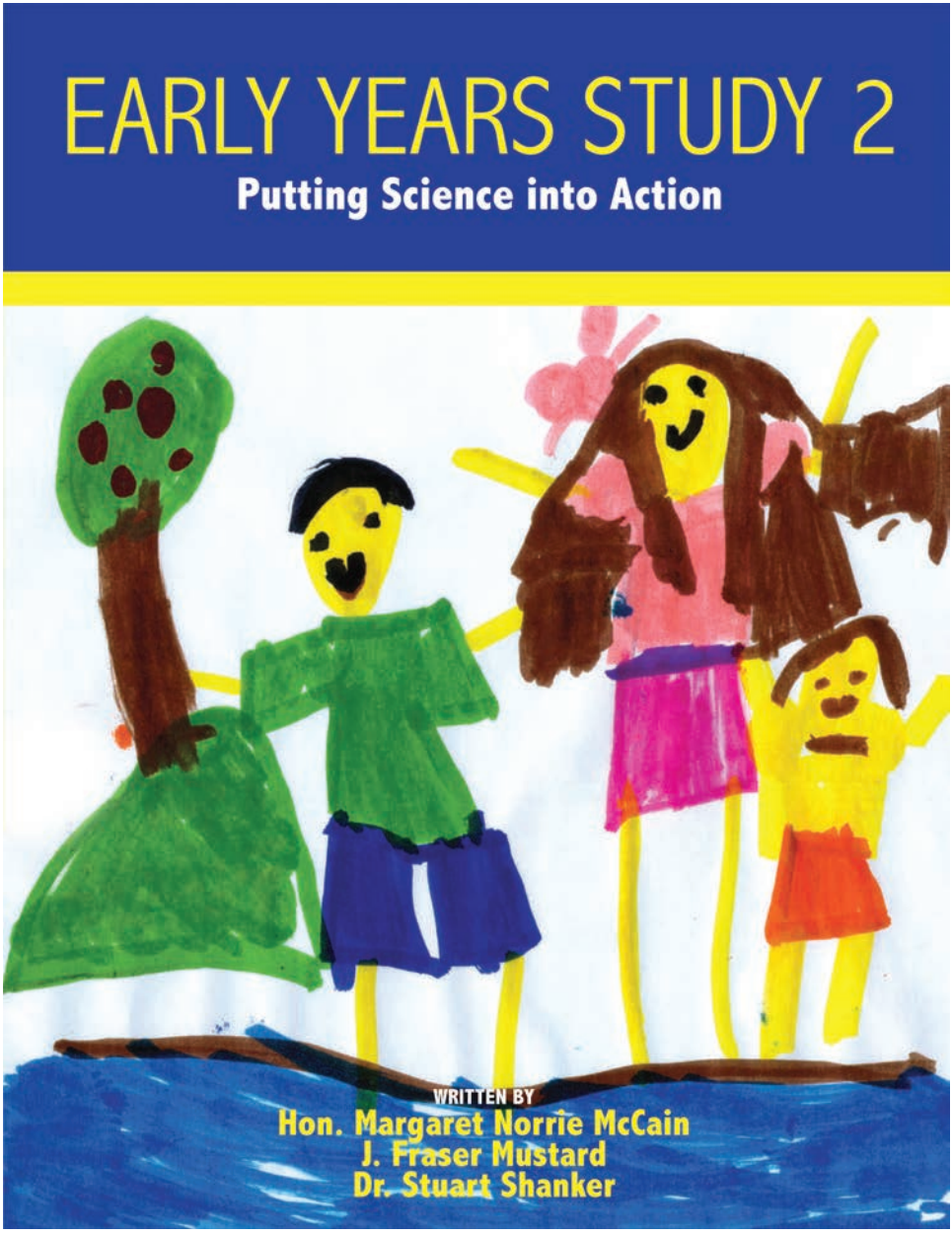
Early Years Study

Final Report

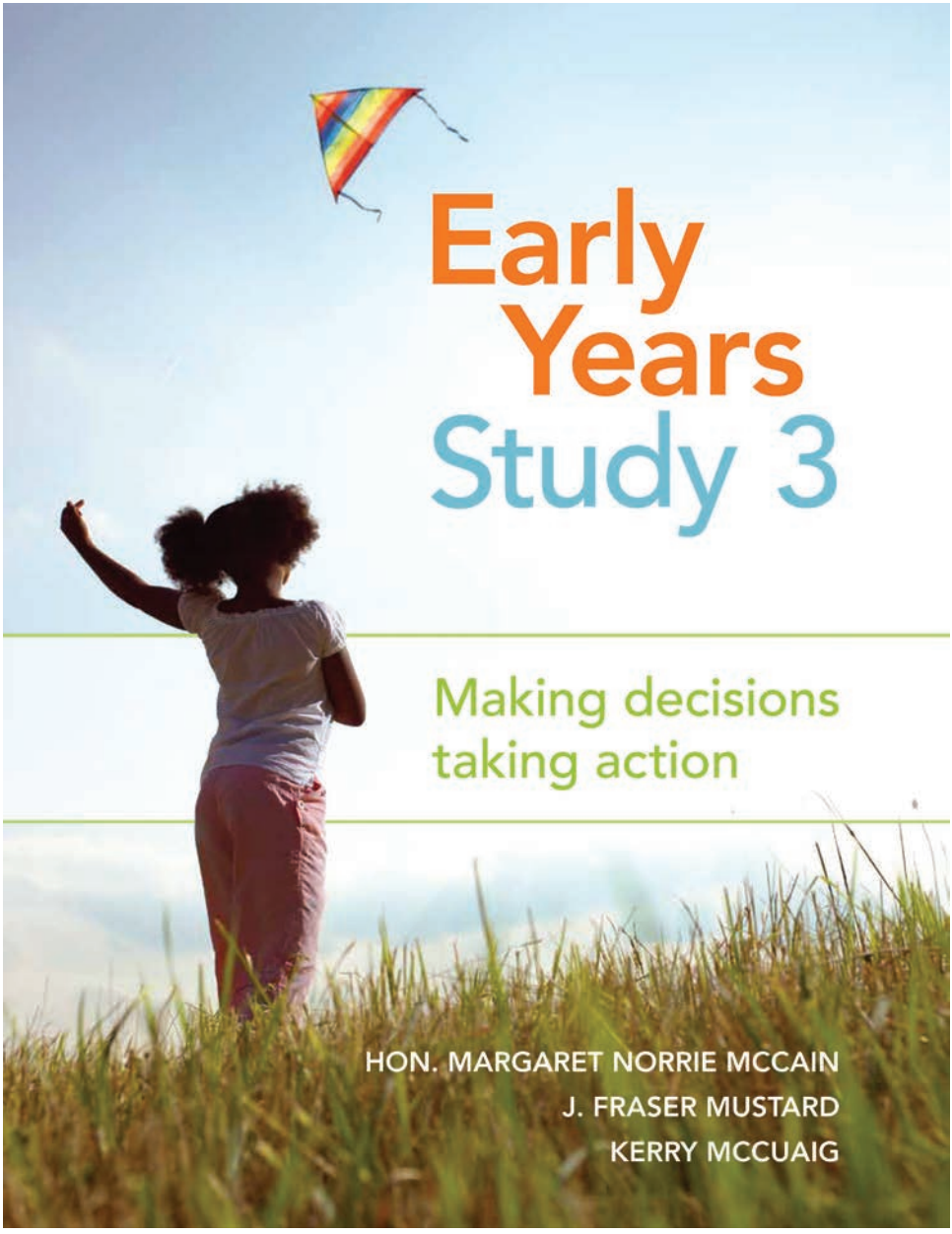
April 1999

Co-chairs: Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain & J. Fraser Mustard

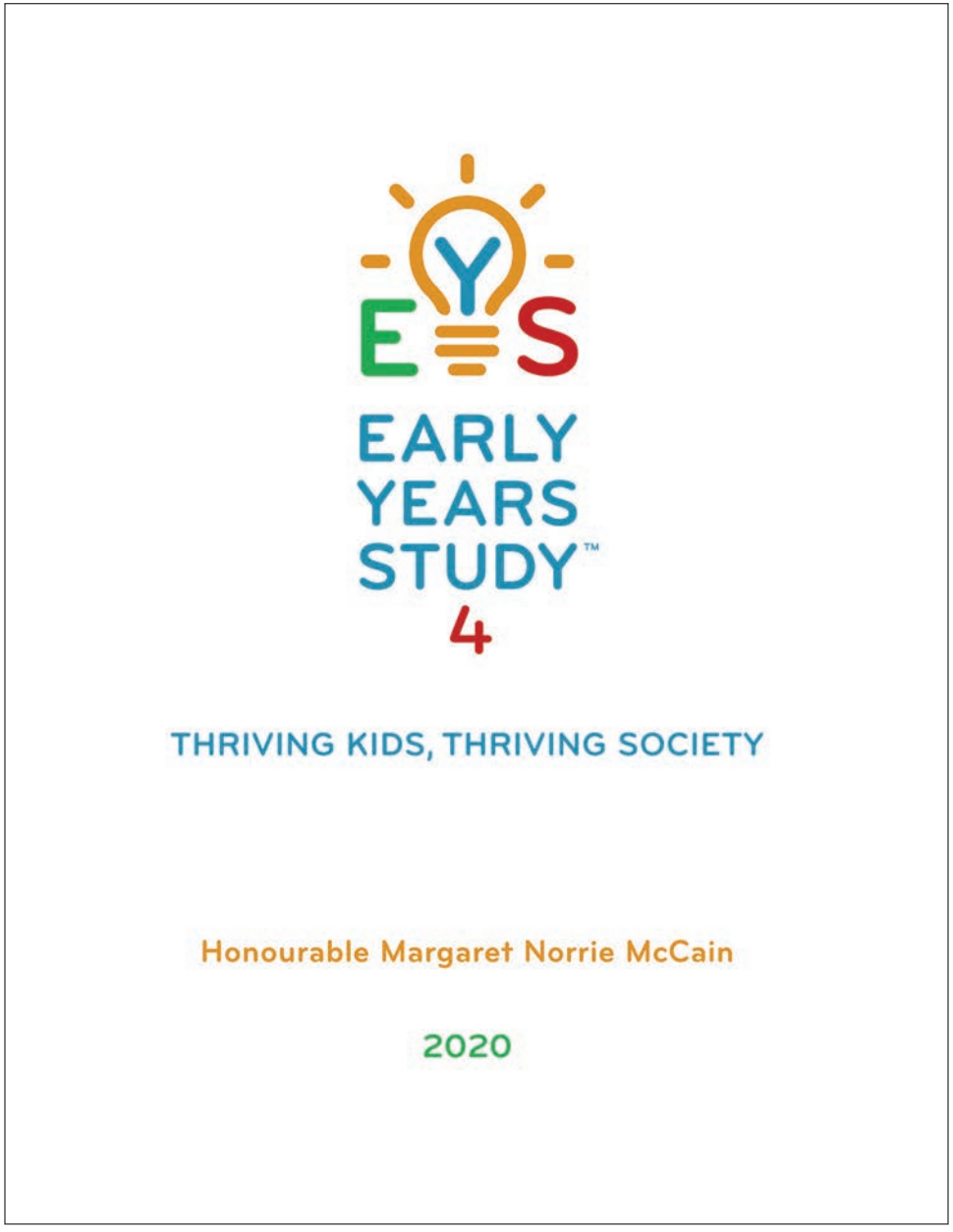
Early Years Study: Reversing the Real Brain Drain (1999).



Early Years Study 2: Putting Science into Action (2007).



Early Years Study 3: Making decisions, taking action (2011).



Early Years Study 4: Thriving Kids, Thriving Society (2020).

FOUR

Schools at the Centre

When we released the third early years study in the spring of 2011, we neglected to give the incredible team at the Bruce/WoodGreen Early Learning Centre at Bruce Jr. Public School in Toronto an advanced warning. This was a major oversight as their school instantly landed in the national spotlight.

The media arrived in force, seeking interviews and footage to showcase the early years centre that played such a central role in our study. The scene would have overwhelmed a seasoned public figure, but the staff, children, and parents didn't miss a beat, turning what could have been chaos into first-rate storytelling.

The media got their story, but more importantly, the message—that schools can and should be vibrant neighbourhood centres serving families from pregnancy through every stage of life—was heard across the country. Bruce Jr. Public School was living proof of what's possible when education is at the heart of a community.

Handling attention wasn't new for the Bruce/WoodGreen team. Jonathan Root, the capable young principal, Lori Gray, the unwavering early years lead, and the wonderful Caitlin Peterson, a truly gifted early childhood educator, were accustomed to the revolving door of visitors. Politicians, academics, and curious onlookers were always eager to see their work in action.

The school had once been on the chopping block, slated for closure like so many others in vulnerable communities. The local councillor, Paula Fletcher—who still fiercely represents the area today—wasn't about to let that happen. She reached out to Fraser Mustard, and through his influence, Charles Pascal at the Atkinson Foundation stepped in. Bruce School got a new lease on life as a site for Toronto First Duty,[40] an initiative that reimagined schools.

At first glance, a First Duty classroom wasn't much different from a traditional Kindergarten or child care setting. Behind the scenes, however, it represented an entirely new way of thinking. Teachers, early childhood educators, educational assistants, and parenting staff worked as a team, blending the best elements of Kindergarten, early childhood education, and family support.

Children didn't shuttle between child care and school, adjusting to different spaces, routines, and expectations. Instead, they spent their days in a stable, nurturing environment, surrounded by the same familiar adults who shared a common vision for their learning and well-being. The goal was to respond simultaneously to two pressing social needs: giving children the smart start they need for school and for life, while supporting parents as they work, pursue their own education, or take care of other family members.

Supporting Families

Parents also benefited. They could head to work with peace of mind, knowing their children were in good hands. Others stayed to spend time in the classroom or drop into the family centre to play with their babies, connect with the staff, and chat with other parents. The school wasn't just a place for learning; it was a place for everyone.

The success of Toronto First Duty did more than demonstrate the potential of schools—it shaped the very mission of our foundation. We saw firsthand how children flourished in environments designed specifically for them. This is why we dedicated ourselves to expanding publicly funded preschool education for all children aged 2 to 5 years, ensuring it is available, high quality, and entirely voluntary. For those who want it, early education should be a strong and supportive option.

We landed on public education as the platform to grow early learning and child care for obvious reasons. Schools already reach every

community, making them the perfect starting point. Across Canada, we've already made real progress. Most 5-year-olds attend full-day Kindergarten, and more provinces and territories are expanding their schools to include 4-year-olds. Even children as young as 2 and 3 are participating in group learning programs provided by schools at higher rates than ever before. The momentum is there—we just need to take the next step.

That step is entirely within reach. By broadening education's mandate to include younger children, we can finally bridge the gap between parental leave and formal schooling. For families who need extended-day options, those supports can be built in. Instead of designing a brand-new social program from the ground up, we can strengthen and expand what already exists. Schools can evolve into something greater: genuine centres where families discover support and connection beginning in pregnancy and continuing throughout childhood.

In *Early Years Study 3*, Magela shared her story, and it hasn't lost its relevance. She was new to Canada and the mother of four boys, ranging in age from 3 months to 7 years. She credited the early learning centre at Bruce School with her "sanity."

"At home all day with the children, I was stressed and depressed. Here, the children do things they love, and I have the support of other parents and the advice of the staff."

The school had a place for the whole family. The oldest boy was in Grade 1; his 4-year-old brother was in full-day junior Kindergarten. Toddler Jonah struggled to adjust. He was anxious and needing the attention his mother had to give to baby Lucas.

With support, Jonah and his mom learned to manage his insecurities, which improved his self-regulation. "Here, I can relax and breastfeed the baby," says Magela. "Jonah is too busy with his friends and toys to mind."

Magela's children were among several thousand who took part in Toronto First Duty. A robust evaluation was attached to the effort, monitoring the impact on children, families, educators, and the school.

The Blueprint for Early Learning Reform

Fraser and I developed the idea of creating an early childhood system as a natural extension of public education in *The Early Years: Three Years Later,*[41] the 2002 follow-up report to our 1999 study. We further refined

and strengthened the case in *Early Years Study 2* in 2007. However, it was *With Our Best Future in Mind,*[42] commissioned by Ontario's Premier Dalton McGuinty, released in 2009, that set change in motion.

This report was different. Instead of rehashing why early childhood development should be a social and economic priority—something we had already made clear—it tackled the *how.* How could new public investments be paired with existing resources to achieve lasting impact? How could we transform schools into true child and family centres that are open year-round and responsive to community needs?

The report was clear and passionate, and its call to action was doable. It called on everyone—governments, educators, health professionals, and community leaders—to break down the silos that kept essential child and family support services operating in isolation. It argued that the components were already there, scattered across different sectors and funding streams. What was missing was the political and public will to weave them together into a coherent, effective service that worked for families.

The report became the blueprint for Ontario's landmark decision to provide all 4- and 5-year-olds with full-day Kindergarten and require schools to offer before- and after-school care for all their students.

It was a great moment, especially for our friends at the Atkinson Foundation, who had supported Toronto First Duty from the beginning. It had been a long road fuelled by the conviction that scientific evidence alone wasn't enough. Research can tell us what is best for children, but real change only occurs when evidence is transformed into action. And large-scale action requires public policy.

The Ontario government's decision to invest in full-day early learning proved what's possible when research, community leadership, and political commitment align. For us, it was one step in a much larger vision, one where every child in every part of the country has access to the high-quality early learning and family support they deserve.

Since its inception in 2002, Toronto's First Duty has sparked change in places far beyond the city's boundaries. We shared it in Atlantic Canada, where communities adapted the concept to meet their needs. We worked with innovators in British Columbia to see how it could fit within their policy landscape. Even in places as far away as Australia, educators and policymakers saw its potential and worked to make it their own.

Visitors who walked through the Bruce/WoodGreen Early Learning Centre often said, *"I wish we could afford this."*

Each time, our answer was the same: *"You can."*

There was no secret funding pool or hidden budget line that made this work possible. The schools running Toronto First Duty received the same resources as any other in their community. They simply used what they had *differently*.

And that was the beauty of the model. Instead of keeping child care, early learning, family support, and public health services in separate silos—each with its own administration, facilities, and funding streams—they were interwoven. The result? A system that was not only better for children and families but also more financially efficient. There is no duplication of effort and no competing bureaucracies paying twice for the same services. Instead, a well-coordinated, streamlined approach makes life easier for parents and delivers the best possible outcomes for kids.

It isn't about spending more—it's about spending smarter. When we saw how well it worked, we knew it wasn't just a Toronto solution. This idea could change how early childhood education is provided everywhere.

Bringing Early Learning to Every Community

There are many solid reasons to expand public education to include younger children. In a paper commissioned by our foundation, economist Craig Alexander[43] provides a compelling rationale.

First, schools are everywhere, from the busiest urban centres to the most remote communities. This makes them natural homes for early learning. No child needs to miss out simply because of where they live. This contrasts with child care.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives[44] presents a stark picture of Canada's child care shortage. In 2023, an estimated 759,000 full-time licensed spaces were available for 1.97 million young children who might need them. Even more concerning, nearly half of those children live in areas classified as "child care deserts"—regions where more than three children compete for each available spot.

A Statistics Canada survey[45] reached a similar conclusion. In 2023, only 34% of children aged 0 to 5 attended licensed child care centres. Shockingly, more families were on waitlists for child care than were

receiving it! However, when early learning is provided through schools, it transforms into a near-universal experience.

Attendance in Ontario's two-year Kindergarten program is voluntary, yet 90% of 5-year-olds and 87% of 4-year-olds participate. In the Northwest Territories, where absenteeism in compulsory schooling is a big challenge, attendance in full-day Kindergarten for 4- and 5-year-olds remains optional, yet 94% of children regularly show up.

By delivering early learning programs through public education, we can turn deserts into playgrounds. We know this model can work everywhere. In jurisdictions where junior Kindergarten became universally available, many remote communities didn't have enough 4-year-olds to operate separate classes. So, they did what small schools have always done—they adapted. Younger children were successfully integrated into multi-age classrooms, just as they have for generations.

If anyone doubts this can work, they should meet the extraordinary educator who teaches children from junior Kindergarten to Grade 12 in a one-room schoolhouse in a small community in the Northwest Territories. She welcomed her little gaggle of preschoolers because she knew the head start of early learning would set them up for school success. That's exactly the thinking we need if we're serious about making early education available to every child, no matter where they live.

The data speaks: participation soars when early learning is embedded in public education. Parents see it as part of their child's educational journey, not an optional extra. And that's transformational, especially for families who face financial, cultural, or logistical barriers to accessing licensed child care.

The Case for School-Based Early Learning

Schools are not only readily available, they are tuition free and inclusive—designed to include all children regardless of ethnicity, gender, faith, developmental needs, or income level. Childcare centres can and often do turn families away for financial or capacity reasons. This is not an option for public schools. They are legally required to serve every child who enters their doors regardless of the complexity of their developmental needs or the family's socioeconomic status.

Yet, the children who stand to gain the most from early learning are often the least likely to participate. Even with the federal $10-a-day

child care initiative, low-income families pay a larger portion of their income for care. For these families, a minor out-of-pocket expense can deter them from participating. Parents can apply for fee subsidies, but these are only available to individuals in paid employment. The process is often unresponsive to the precarious work of low-income families.

Children's cognitive, social, and emotional development are closely linked to their family's socioeconomic status. Disadvantaged children are more likely to experience learning, behavioural, or speech difficulties—challenges that, if left unaddressed, can compound over time.

This is where school-based early learning programs have a significant advantage. Developmental concerns can be identified sooner when children enter the education system earlier. Instead of waiting until Kindergarten or Grade 1—when traditional special needs assessments typically begin—schools can promptly provide targeted support when it is most effective.

Dr. David Philpott, [46] a leading expert in special education in Canada, explains: "Over 60% of special education needs stem from weaknesses in literacy, numeracy, language skills, and behaviour—all areas that high-quality early learning programs are designed to strengthen."

Schools are effective at identifying vulnerabilities overlooked in early childhood. Statistics Canada reports that as children transition from home to school, the number diagnosed with a learning disability grows by nearly 25%.[47] If these challenges were addressed earlier, we could reduce the intensity of special education supports and the overall number of children needing them.

Special education costs Canada's primary and secondary schools billions of dollars each year. Investing in earlier identification and intervention through school-based early learning would enhance children's outcomes and yield significant long-term savings.

None of this diminishes the incredible skill and dedication of early childhood educators in recognizing and supporting children with developmental challenges. Childcare professionals go above and beyond to ensure that children with exceptionalities receive the care and attention they need. But the reality remains that not all children attend child care. And even when a centre has a space available, there's no guarantee it will accept every child, especially those with special needs.

A recent Ontario survey[48] documented how often this happens. Over one-quarter of childcare centre directors said they had denied enrolment to at least one child with additional needs in the previous year. Children were also expelled after struggling to adapt, or their parents were called so frequently to pick them up early that they eventually had no choice but to withdraw.

While most jurisdictions provide some level of support to help childcare providers accommodate children with disabilities, only Manitoba and Prince Edward Island require that programs accept all children as a condition of funding—and in PEI's case, only in some centres.[49] Everywhere else, whether a child with exceptionalities is welcomed depends on the willingness and capacity of individual providers.

Then there's the gap between systems when children can slip through the cracks. Children receiving special needs interventions through preschool services may find themselves in limbo, waiting to be reassessed to qualify for the school's special needs stream when they start Kindergarten. Even a brief disruption in support can have lasting consequences for young children and their families. Early childhood development doesn't pause while systems catch up, and gaps in intervention during this critical stage can't simply be made up later.

That's the fundamental difference. Children have a *right* to attend publicly funded schools, but child care centres operate within limitations that may require them to turn families away. This is a policy flaw with real and lasting consequences. Families of children with special needs struggle to find appropriate care, and parents—often mothers—are forced to leave the workforce altogether.

The impact extends beyond the classroom. Addressing developmental challenges early can reduce reliance on long-term social programs, easing financial pressure on health care, social assistance, and mental health services. Research has repeatedly shown that it is almost always more effective—and less costly—to address a problem in early childhood than to remediate it later in life.

Inclusion, Democracy, and Well-Being

School-based early learning programs extend beyond ensuring inclusivity; they also foster diversity and serve as early incubators for democratic

engagement. As Fraser often quipped, "Puppies and kittens raised together grow up to be cats and dogs that get along."

This early exposure not only prepares children for academic success but also cultivates future citizens who are committed to fairness and participation in democratic processes. Ultimately, investing in early learning is an investment in a more inclusive and resilient democracy.

Extreme populism has gained ground in many of the world's wealthiest countries. A notable exception is Spain, recently touted as having the fastest-growing economy in the European Union. Why is Spain doing so well? One key reason is immigration.[50] Spain promotes immigration as an effective way to protect prosperity, in sharp contrast to governments across Europe that are cracking down on it.

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez told his parliament that immigration was not just a question of humanity, but the only realistic means of sustaining the welfare state. "Throughout history, migration has been one of the great drivers of the development of nations while hatred and xenophobia have been—and continue to be—the greatest destroyer of nations."[51]

Even before its latest visa restrictions, Canada had not done well integrating new arrivals. Studies have examined the hard costs of isolation and the resulting development of immigrant enclaves. They also explored the economic advantages of creating strong neighbourhood networks and leveraging the talents of new Canadians. For a country like Canada, whose very existence depends on immigration, having the school take double-billing as a welcome wagon for new arrivals is effective programming that makes infinite sense.

Let's revisit Magela's experience at Bruce School. Instead of being "stressed and depressed" at home with an infant and a cantankerous toddler, the centre allowed her to kick the isolation that new mothers often experience. As a new Canadian, she found a social network at the school. She credits the program with allowing her to relax, breastfeed her baby, and help her toddler regulate his behaviour.

If the centre reduced but one incident of maternal depression, it would more than pay for itself. Depression disrupts the mother-infant relationship and increases the risk for learning, emotional, and behavioural disorders in children. Most new mothers, and up to 25% of new fathers, experience depressive symptoms that range from very mild to quite

severe. When depression is detected early, studies have found positive results from expanding the mother's support network. Breastfeeding also has a protective effect on maternal mental health.

Magela isn't alone. Many parents feel stretched to their limits, especially those juggling multiple responsibilities. Parents caring for their aging parents while raising children—the so-called "sandwich caregivers"—know this all too well. Their responsibilities take a toll, with the vast majority reporting exhaustion, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed. The weight of caregiving affects their work, forcing them to adjust their schedules, reduce their hours, or even step back from their careers.[52]

When parents are stressed, children feel it. Parental stress makes it harder to engage positively with children, to set boundaries, and to nurture emotional well-being. Research has shown that chronic stress in parents can trickle down to children, affecting their emotional and academic development in lasting ways.

Well-designed early learning programs can provide children with stability and enrichment, while giving parents the time they need to work, care for family members, or simply recharge.

Canadians must make the hard and important job of raising children easier. As a society, we cannot have it all. We rely on women's labour and expect families to shoulder the social and financial load of rearing the next generation. However, we pay a significant price when families struggle and their children are left behind. Just as health care costs become unmanageable without health promotion, responding after the fact to children who have fallen through the cracks is equally unsustainable.

A Seamless Learning Journey

One of the great advantages of school-based early learning programs is the opportunity to create a continuum of learning—a seamless path from early education through Kindergarten and into primary school. Too often, children and families experience an abrupt transition when they move from community-based early learning settings into formal education. Different expectations, routines, and teaching methods can create stress, particularly for children vulnerable to learning challenges.

By expanding schools to include younger children, we can better align early education with primary learning, ease transitions, and ensure that children enter Grade 1 with confidence.

That said, schools still have work to do. Simply housing early learning within the same building isn't enough. Programs must be purposefully designed to bridge early childhood education with schooling. Child care should naturally extend a child's day, integrating with the educational experience and in a common environment rather than being segregated into an unused portal or neglected basement space. When thoughtfully aligned, this cohesive approach sets the stage for children's successful educational journey.

I am not Pollyannish. A demonstration site that is under regular observation and is given leeway to experiment will not be exactly replicated when it is scaled up to serve tens of thousands of families. When full-day Kindergarten became a universal entitlement in Ontario, the beautiful open space that was home to 4- and 5-year-olds at Bruce School was split in two to comply with standardized class sizes. The flow between the parenting centre and the Kindergarten rooms is not as easy when classroom doors are closed. Security cameras and an intercom at the entrance have replaced open access to the school.

The original legislation requiring schools to employ early childhood educators as part of a single teaching team to provide extended hours was eliminated. It fell victim to childcare providers who successfully lobbied the government to retain control of the before- and after-school childcare franchise.

As much as I mourn the lost beauty of the early learning centre at Bruce School, I revel in the 260,000 children in Ontario now receiving a full school day of early learning taught by teams of certified teachers and registered early childhood educators who place play at the centre of their practice.

I am heartened by the mounting evidence showing the substantial impact of full-day learning on children's progress in the later grades, particularly for English-language learners and children from immigrant and lower-income families. Children with two years of Kindergarten reach Grade 1 ahead in reading, numeracy, and self-regulation and maintain their progress as shown by assessments done in Grades 3 and 6.[53] Parents are also benefiting, with strong positive impacts on mothers' employment, hours of work, and earnings.

Kindergarten is the only group early learning experience most Canadian children receive. What I love most is it offers children from

all backgrounds the opportunity to play and learn together, making public early learning programs key players in tackling inequality.

Protecting Play

Craig Alexander says some of his colleagues don't see the need for preschool because the "kids just play." He sets them straight play is the work of childhood. When little ones lift, drop, pour, bounce, hide, build, and knock things down, they are learning. Through play, they explore scientific ideas such as what sinks and floats, grasp math by arranging blocks, and experiment with language as they act out different roles. These playful experiences build social-emotional skills that foster self-esteem and lasting, supportive relationships.

However, play in early childhood is constantly under attack from ill-informed policymakers who seek to reinstate "the basics" in Kindergarten or sanitize children's environments to eliminate any chance of risk—or fun.

Few things make me sadder than a playground with posted rules that begin with "no running, no tagging, one person on the slide at a time," and so on. Risk-taking in play allows children to develop decision-making skills, push their limits, learn new life skills, and importantly, lessen fears and anxiety as they test their capabilities.

Early education is the first tier of lifelong learning. Each tier has its own goals and pedagogical approaches. The pedagogy of early learning is fundamentally different from that of primary education. Young learners thrive in environments that harness their boundless curiosity, allowing them to explore and acquire the foundational skills needed for subsequent learning.[54] The goal is to expand education to include young children, not to impose inappropriate curricula on them.

The Workforce: Critical Yet Ignored

Young people, the vast majority of them women, enrol in early childhood education programs because they are passionate about working with young children. However, only half of new graduates will work in licensed child care. Those who do soon realize that passion doesn't pay the bills, causing many to leave after just a few years.

This is the challenge facing early learning and child care in Canada today: the shortage of qualified early childhood educators (ECEs) willing

to work in licensed child care threatens our hopes for a nationwide early learning program.

Early learning and child care is a vital service that necessitates a strong infrastructure that the private sector, whether for-profit or non-profit, cannot provide. The fault doesn't lie with the profession. An early childhood education diploma is a coveted qualification that opens many doors. ECEs are in demand in schools, healthcare, social work, family support, and as government workers, particularly if they have French or Indigenous language skills.

The childcare wage gap isn't solely about gender. ECEs are also paid considerably less than professionals in other female-dominated industries that require similar levels of education. A full-time ECE can earn considerably less than an administrative assistant, practical nurse, or paralegal. Hence, licensed child care stands out in its struggle to attract and retain educators.

Many provinces and territories have used their Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) funding to address ECE compensation, but not at levels sufficient to stem the exodus.

In 2025, the minimum hourly wage for a trained educator working in licensed child care in Ontario was $24.86, below a living wage in most parts of the province. One-third of educators lack health benefits, 41% have no personal leave, and an overwhelming 82% do not have a pension or access to an employer-supported RRSP. The result? Nearly half (45%) of Ontario's 52,038 registered ECEs are not working in licensed child care, and the percentage of trained educators in the sector has steadily declined.[55]

ECE wages vary widely depending on the type of setting. The median hourly wage for ECEs employed in Ontario Kindergartens and other publicly operated programs is around $30. Pay in non-profit child centres averages $25 an hour, while the lowest wages are found in for-profit child care centres.[56]

Unionization helps elevate wages. On average, unionized staff in licensed childcare in Ontario earn $2.20 more per hour than their non-unionized counterparts. ECEs working in school-delivered Kindergarten are fully unionized, while only 21% of educators in non-profit childcare centres, and a mere 1% in for-profit centres belong to a union.[57]

Low compensation shapes negative perceptions of work in early childhood education. When wages are low and benefits are minimal, early

childhood education is often viewed as a job rather than a profession or career, and its role is undervalued by society.

Public policy devoted to the workforce does yield results. Prince Edward Island undertook a multi-pronged strategy to increase wages, offer professional benefits, and improve working conditions, reducing the educator turnover rate from 50% to 2%![58] Unfortunately, few jurisdictions are following PEI's lead.

The bottom line is when educators are well-compensated, have access to benefits, and are relieved of unnecessary burdens, they can focus on what truly matters: nurturing and educating our children. I believe that by mirroring the stable, respected environment of public schools, we not only elevate early childhood education into a true profession but also ensure that our most skilled educators remain dedicated to shaping the future.

Elements of System Building

While labour costs in school-based early learning programs may be higher than in licensed childcare alternatives, the public sector's ability to leverage economies of scale can result in significant cost savings. Schools can tap into existing resources, including support from school councils, principals, maintenance staff, secretaries, counsellors, educational psychologists, speech pathologists, and special education teachers. Special needs resourcing that is part of early years services can be integrated into the school network.

Public sector financial efficiencies also extend to procurement. Governments can negotiate lower prices for food, toys, and other supplies, ensuring resources are allocated more efficiently. For example, a 2020 study found public child care centres in Toronto had an administrative cost of $555 per child, compared to $640 per child at non-profits and a much higher $962 per child at for-profit centres.

Administrative expenditures include mortgages, borrowing costs, vehicle leases, and other fees not directly related to the delivery of child care. Similarly, non-salary expenditures per child were $1,637 at public centres, $2,041 at non-profits, and $3,663 at for-profits. The expectation that private childcare providers run more efficiently due to market competition does not align with these findings.[59]

Another significant advantage of school-based early learning programs is their access to school infrastructure. Schools already have gyms, libraries, cafeterias, and outdoor play spaces, reducing the need for additional investment in land acquisition and facilities.

Those schools that need to expand to include younger learners can be designed with dedicated early learning spaces. Older schools may need renovations or temporary solutions to accommodate early learning programs effectively.

A significant advantage of public education is its governance and accountability structure. Schools answer to elected officials and are subject to rigorous performance monitoring. Long-term planning follows demographic changes to ensure sufficient capacity for future cohorts of children. Unlike licensed child care, where oversight and reporting vary widely, school systems benefit from standardized impact assessments and precise accountability measures.

Parents also play a crucial role in holding governments accountable for education quality and expect high standards from publicly funded schools. While provincial and territorial governments have increasingly taken responsibility for early learning and child care, the accountability mechanisms remain uneven. Even requirements in the CWELCC agreements for consistent public progress reports remain inconsistent.

Evaluating the effectiveness of licensed child care centres is challenging because of the large number of providers and unreliable data collection. By contrast, school-based early learning programs benefit from established data collection, longitudinal monitoring, and performance evaluation and reporting systems. This makes it easier to assess their impact and justify public spending.

Financial viability remains a persistent challenge in the licensed childcare sector. To sustain operations, childcare providers must balance government funding with parental fees, and for-profit centres must deliver returns for their owners or investors.

Parents can be let down by their childcare provider. In Ontario alone, in 2024, 212 centres opened, but 152 closed,[60] leaving families scrambling to make alternative arrangements. A family who pays $500 one month can find their bill popping to $2,300 when their centre opts out of the CWELCC plan.

Concerns persist about the long-term sustainability of CWELCC funding. If federal funding doesn't keep pace, provinces and territories may not cover the difference, putting many centres at financial risk. Most non-profit centres lack reserves and would be especially vulnerable to funding shortfalls.

Expanding school-based early learning programs reduces these risks. Unlike child care, public schools are not subject to financial failure. If a school does close, families are guaranteed an alternate placement for their child.

Now, More Than Ever, it Must be Public

My greatest fear and most compelling argument for public delivery of early education and child care is the spectre of for-profit child care. I am not referring to the early childhood educator who has been serving local families for years. My concern is the private equity companies that have shown intense interest in child care since the CWELCC investment was announced. They excel at siphoning off public funding.

Canadians cannot ignore the experiences of others. Childcare services in Australia, New Zealand, England, and parts of the United States once looked like Canada's current marketplace. Policy changes poured significant public money into child care, leading to a surge in corporate chains that now dominate those markets. When corporate childcare takes hold, its goal is money, not children.

Some Canadian provinces have adopted funding and wage policies that promote for-profit child care, contradicting their CWELCC obligations. The incentives for these corporate giants are enormous. Ontario, for instance, allows operators to earn an 8% profit margin. That is public money taken from the care and education of Ontario's youngest children.

Take but one example: Two for-profit child care centres in midtown Toronto acquired new owners in early 2023. The centres became the company's 12th and 13th sites, taking the owners halfway to their goal of supplying 5% of the 86,000 new childcare spaces Ontario pledged under the CWELCC plan.

The staff were told to reapply for their jobs. Employees with years of experience were offered minimum wage. All staff were placed on a three-month probationary period, prohibited from taking on any outside work, and informed that the company could transfer them to

any of its other locations. Parents' efforts to intervene were rejected, but they noticed a $3 weekly surcharge on their bill "for charitable giving." Within weeks, 16 of the 19 employees left, and parents began searching elsewhere for care.[61]

Some governments are depending on this type of corporate operator to increase the supply of child care. Corporate owners seek favour with politicians, and it is common to see their centres serve as backdrops for government childcare announcements.

Despite the CWELCC's preference for non-profit and public child care and the caps on for-profit growth in most agreements, public childcare funding can show up on the stock exchange. Storefronts with names like BrightPath, Kids and Company, Busy Bees, and New Horizons are almost as ubiquitous as Starbucks. Behind them are big-named private equity firms: Eagle MidCo (owned by the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan), Fremman Capital, and the Dutch firm Waterland.[62]

The United Kingdom provides a chilling tale of how quickly corporate care can take over and start dictating public policy. Like Canada, England is investing heavily in child care, offering up to 30 hours of no-fee care for children under 5 years old, provided the parents are working.[63]

Private equity firms now dominate the UK childcare industry, almost doubling their holdings since 2018, when the new funding began.[64] Mike Short, with the UK public sector union Unison, cautions that "once private equity firms become involved, the pursuit of profit is ruthless. The structure of equity-funded nurseries is so complex, often with hundreds of subsidiary companies created, that it's almost impossible to fathom where the cash is going."[65]

Antonia Simon at University College London (UCL), the lead author of a report on corporate takeovers of child care in the United Kingdom, concludes: "The complex financial structures of these companies involve foreign investors and shareholders that are used, alongside public money, to expand their market share. … little of this money is being reinvested back into the sector."[66] Indeed, studies show that more than £1 of every £5 of public funding that goes to private centres ends up as corporate profit.[67]

Investors don't create more child care; rather, they snap up existing centres. UCL's research finds the buyers are "heavily indebted" with "risky financial operating models [that] could threaten the provision of nursery places." The findings prompted warnings that increasing private

equity involvement could leave childcare providers more vulnerable to closure and would do nothing to address the shortage of places in deprived areas.[68]

Australia's experience revealed how true this can be. Child care attracts investors because it provides an efficient and lucrative way to amass real estate holdings. When ABC Learning went into receivership in 2008, the future of 1,000 centres, 120,000 children, and 16,000 childcare workers was uncertain. A small majority of the centres were saved, but at a cost to taxpayers who paid hundreds of millions in bailout funds.[69]

Once in place, changing funding systems is extremely difficult. Even the turmoil of ABC's collapse did not alter how Australia's government funds child care. The same tax credit system that fuelled uncontrolled parent fees and corporate expansion still operates.[70]

Some argue that corporate know-how is needed if Canada is to meet parent demand for more child care. Quebec took this route when the non-profit Centres de la Petite Enfance (CPEs) couldn't expand quickly enough to provide $5-a-day care. For-profit operators were encouraged to open with the support of large public subsidies. Twenty-five years later, Quebec is still grappling with the consequences. For-profit closures have decreased the overall number of childcare spaces, and over a third of for-profit centres are rated inadequate.[71]

Further study found for-profit child care did little to address the achievement gap between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. For children who attended CPEs, the gap was virtually eliminated by Grade 6.[72]

When corporations control the market, they also set the policy agenda, invariably targeting quality standards to maximize profits. A parting gift from the UK's outgoing Conservative government was to increase the number of 2-year-olds in each class without adding staff or resources.

Corporate providers are often cited for the most appalling conditions, including mouse droppings scattered throughout children's playrooms, changing tables, and food preparation areas. Programs were found operating without hot water or soap.[73] A rash of infant deaths in UK child care chains has been attributed to understaffing and cutbacks in inspections and training.[74]

Preventable disasters also occur in Canadian facilities. In 2023, an E. coli outbreak affected 17 child care centres in Calgary. Central to the

outbreak was a kitchen owned and operated by Fueling Minds Inc., a for-profit operation that also manages child care centres. This vertical corporatization is a trend, where corporate chains establish spin-off companies specializing in property management, administration, staff training, and the provision of food and program supplies.

The owners have a history of food handling violations. Some 359 children and adults required hospitalization, and many children are still being monitored for kidney damage.[75] Yet, the maximum penalty the company faces is a $120,000 fine—hardly a deterrent.

Some provinces have placed strong guardrails around for-profit operators, requiring them to meet the same quality and accountability standards as demanded of their not-for-profit counterparts. This does not alter the fact that, under the CWELCC agreements, child care is almost entirely publicly funded. When an owner ceases operations, they take the facility and assets with them—all of which were funded with public dollars.

A UK advocacy group, with the catchy name Pregnant Then Screwed, wants the government to put measures in place to prevent serious profiteering. Herein lies the problem:[76] the United Kingdom is so deeply into investment-backed child care that it can do little more than curtail its excesses.[77] The new Labour government has pledged increased oversight, but this means resources that could be used to improve childcare quality and access will instead go to curbing corporate greed.

Canada still has options. While the proportion of for-profit providers has remained constant, there has been almost a 30% increase in the number of privately owned spaces.[78] The window is closing on whether we will create an early learning childcare system or a playground for investors.

The Case for Public Early Learning Programs

Building Canada's early learning and care system on the platform of public education is its best protection against corporate control. Public schools have long-term stability, a clear educational mandate, and a commitment to quality not influenced by profit motives.

Twenty years ago, when Paul Martin was attempting to get a national childcare program off the ground, Roy Romanow, a former premier of Saskatchewan who led the 2002 Commission on the Future of Health Care, and I published an open letter[79] in *The Globe and Mail*.

It could have been written today. "A Canada-wide system of early learning and child care holds many promises," we wrote. If done well, it will provide multiple dividends. Done poorly, it will waste scarce public funds, fail children and families, and dilute trust in public institutions.

Then, as now, we know what it takes to produce good child care and how it can all go terribly wrong. The money pledged in 2021, as in 2005, is insufficient to meet the needs of every preschooler in Canada, but how it is spent will determine the new national program to come.

No existing early-year service meets all the needs of Canadian families. Kindergartens are there to educate children. Resource centres support parenting, and child care is for working parents. A single service with multiple functions is more cost-effective and better able to respond to the changing needs of families. Again, we encourage provinces and territories to rationalize their early-year services to provide a stable platform for expansion.

An effective program must support its educators; dedicated people who view the work as a viable career are indispensable. They must begin their careers appropriately trained and continue in their roles because they are adequately compensated and supported to perform their jobs well. In our letter, we warned that childcare centres can be built without addressing workforce issues, but there will be no one to work in them. The number of classrooms sitting empty today because of staffing shortages[80] shows just how prophetic our words were.

Government child care offices must exchange their subsidy-doling functions to provide the support the system requires to expand and operate effectively.

In 2025, as in 2005, auspice matters. Child care, like schools, libraries, or hospitals, is a community service, not a commodity. Whether a centre opens or closes, where it is located, and whom it serves are not merely business decisions. They require democratic input. While public services should be businesslike in their efficiency, their sole business should be the well-being of children.

In 2005, our last words for the federal government were, "do not be afraid to lead." It remains so in 2025. Ours is a vast and diverse country, and every jurisdiction argues for flexibility. Nevertheless, the point of a national program is to provide all children, no matter where they reside, with access to quality early learning and care.

Then, as now, Ottawa wants to emerge from negotiations with everyone on its side. But 13 signatures do not make a national program if cross-Canada quality and accountability assurances are abandoned. The temptation of "let's make a deal" for its own sake must be supplanted by a commitment to making a good deal for the sake of our children and in service of a stronger and healthier Canada.

FIVE

The Road Ahead

I have argued that expanding early learning and child care on the established foundation of public education is good public policy; however, the legislation governing the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) plan adds complexity.

Early learning and child care serves two purposes: to care and to educate. As such, it addresses two clients: parents and children. Their needs overlap, but they are not identical. When accommodating the labour force demands on parents, access to care dominates. The quality of programming that children receive may be desired, but it is not a policy driver in the CWELCC agreements. Provinces and territories are judged on their ability to bring down parent fees and meet growth targets for new spaces.

The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's ability to work fashioned the CWELCC as a labour market support. The CWELCC's efforts in meeting its priorities are having a measurable impact. Over 100,000 childcare spaces have been added to the national supply, and labour market participation among core-aged mothers with young children reached a record 79.7% in 2023—a major achievement for gender equality. Not to be ignored is the $32 billion the initiative added to Canada's Gross Domestic Product in 2024.[81]

The demand for more "care" however, has diminished attention on children's early learning, particularly concerning the provision of early education by schools. Care can be addressed by recruiting informal providers, compensating relatives, or increasing the number of children each staff member supervises. There are no shortcuts to delivering quality early learning.

A definition of early learning and child care and its purposes is not included in the new federal child care legislation.[82] This is unfortunate. The term "child care" can be used broadly, encompassing everything from informal childminding to licensed early learning facilities. Without a precise definition, the funding secured through the legislation is vulnerable to future governments that may shift priorities—potentially replacing affordable services with parent vouchers or tax credits. While the legislation includes principles encouraging provinces, territories, and Indigenous governments to establish standards, these are left to individual jurisdictions, leading to potential inconsistencies.

The CWELCC agreements with the provinces and territories delineate the types of programs eligible for funding. The framework included in all the agreements describes early learning and child care programs as those that support the direct care and early learning of children "in settings including, *but not limited to,* regulated child care centres, regulated family child care homes, early learning centres, preschools, and nursery schools."[83] Despite this generous definition, the agreements have had a chilling effect on schools expanding their commitments to early learning.

In 2010, the changes to the *Education Act* introduced full-day Kindergarten in Ontario, allowing school boards to directly operate extended-day and before-and-after school programs using existing classrooms and facilities. This approach proved highly effective, as it immediately expanded access for children and created unionized jobs for early childhood educators.

Because these programs were operated by schools, they did not require a childcare license—an issue that became problematic under the CWELCC, which applies exclusively to licensed childcare. In response, school boards rushed to license classrooms that met childcare standards so families could benefit from CWELCC's reduced fee schedule. However, there was no capital funding available for further classroom renovations. Unlicensed programs offered by school boards were forced to charge parents two

to three times the rate of licensed care,[84] causing many to abandon their expansion plans. This left families on waitlists struggling to find care and early childhood educators without the unionized jobs they had expected.

Nova Scotia's bold plan to include 3-year-olds in pre-primary classrooms was also paused because the concept did not meet federal funding criteria. Newfoundland and Labrador's vision for universal pre-Kindergarten offered by schools for 4-year-olds was modified. Instead of universal, no-fee PreK, it has become an extension of $10-a-day child care, which has expanded sporadically as the province tries to find non-profit operators with enough qualified staff to operate the program.

Why the Slow Uptake of Preschool?

There are good reasons why the federal government isn't directive about school funding. The 1867 *British North America Act* assigned exclusive jurisdiction to the provinces for education, which they have jealously guarded ever since.

Finances deter both levels of government. CWELCC is a significant program that needs to expand. Provinces and territories do not fully trust that federal funding will keep pace with escalating costs. They have been let down in the past. Perhaps the renewal of the agreements,[85] providing annual increases until 2031, will alleviate some of those concerns. Schools, still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, lack the energy to undertake a new program.

In an era where public funding for almost anything is under attack and privatization is the preferred direction, adding to a public institution as big as education would require considerable political will. Child care as an arms-length transfer payment service makes it easier for governments to manage public expectations. If offered as a school entitlement, parents would not tolerate the inconsistent availability or the exclusion of children with disabilities. As a private entity, these problems can be more easily deflected and neutralized.

Another barrier that cannot be overlooked is the hostility within the childcare sector toward school-operated early education and care. When schools try to include younger children, childcare advocates are often the strongest objectors. There isn't a public official in any jurisdiction who has expanded school entitlement for young children without stories of hardship.

During the public hearings on federal childcare legislation, major organizations urged policymakers to exclude "pre-Kindergarten delivered by school authorities" from any definition in the *Act*.[86] This exclusion would deny young children the right to attend their local schools.

I certainly understand why early childhood professionals may have concerns about schools offering programs for young learners. Without proper preparation, early learning's playful approach could be compromised. Teachers who are not trained to work with young children may not be suited to guide their learning. Additionally, schools can be bureaucratic and are not always agile when responding to special circumstances.

However, schools possess the elements necessary to provide what childcare advocates have long said they want: free, universal access for children, good jobs for educators, and the resources needed to deliver high-quality programs. Instead of taking away from childcare, when education takes on responsibility for the early learning of preschoolers it opens space in centres for the significantly underserved infant and toddler groups.

Over half of 4-year-olds are enrolled in some form of school-delivered pre-Kindergarten,[87] and Canada's schools do deliver for their students. UNESCO has ranked Canada 's education system as number one among developed countries.[88] In the most recent round of international PISA tests, Canada was one of the few countries to appear in the top 10 for mathematics, science, and reading.

The tests, administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), are a major study of educational performance and indicate that Canada's teenagers are among the best educated in the world.[89] Canadian high school diplomas are recognized internationally. At the university level, Canada has a high proportion of working-age adults who have completed higher education—55% compared to an average of 35% in OECD countries. Our schools must be doing something right.

Despite the varied policy approaches across provinces and territories, Canadian schools remain remarkably consistent in their commitment to fairness and equity. Families can confidently move between provinces and territories, assured that a school placement will be available for their children at their current grade level. A high school graduate can enroll in any Canadian post-secondary program with comparable readiness.

Our schools also effectively support children from newly arrived families, helping them catch up and perform at the same level as their peers.

Canadians' support for public education should not be overlooked. Primary and secondary schooling in Canada is predominantly public. Over 95% of Canadians choose public school education for their children. Canada's low proportion of private schools is unique among OECD countries. Our public schools are fully government-funded and employ only certified educators. They are remarkably efficient at implementing policy and monitoring outcomes while being accountable and transparent.

Children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and cultures attend. Our schools have educated prime ministers, Supreme Court justices, business leaders, and professionals from all walks of life. Unlike their U.S. counterparts, Canadian parents do not struggle to send their children to private schools.

When delivered by schools, early learning programs are seen as an extension of education, elevating its status. Unlike childcare funding, which is often subject to partisan debates, public education is widely accepted as a necessary public investment.

The relationship provides mutual benefits. Research indicates that when children begin school at a younger age, parents are more involved and remain engaged throughout their children's education. This yields significant advantages, as children whose parents take part in their schooling tend to excel both socially and academically. Teachers also gain from their collaboration with early childhood professionals, incorporating emergent and experiential early learning pedagogical approaches into their practice.

Positioning early learning centres in neighbourhood schools brings families in contact with the school environment. This can be extremely powerful, creating paradigm shifts for schools to better understand their role in their communities.

Public education's other advantage is its ability to scale up. Ontario successfully provided full-day Kindergarten to 260,000 4- and 5-year-olds within five years. Nova Scotia's Pre-primary program became universally available within four years. The Northwest Territories provided junior Kindergarten within three years despite numerous challenges in infrastructure development in the Far North. Even during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Quebec managed to add 1,000 new classrooms for 4-year-olds in their schools.

The same cannot be said of child care. Despite the new funding and gains made, the CWELCC is unlikely to achieve its goal of 250,000 new childcare spaces by 2026. There is a compelling narrative in the 2021 Nunavut CWELCC agreement[90] describing the unrealistic expectation that voluntary boards will develop and maintain a service as essential as child care. There is plenty of need for early learning and child care, and non-profit agencies will continue to fill part of that need. But it is naïve to assume that early education will be universally available and flourish without a strong public presence.

That's why I am proud of the foundation's Atlantic Region Early Childhood Education Initiative,[91] led by Stephen McNeil, whose leadership in Nova Scotia set a powerful precedent for early childhood education. The evidence is clear—integrating the early years with the public school system leads to better outcomes for children, stronger support for families, and a more sustainable profession for educators. The success of these programs is undeniable, and the economic benefits are well-documented. This is not just an investment in education; it's an investment in the future. That's why we will continue to advocate for this essential alignment—it simply makes sense.

SIX

What Others are Saying

The last words belong to others. During the book's planning phase, we decided to contact a select few individuals with whom I have worked closely over the years. I have my memories of what happened, what worked, and what didn't, but I wanted to see if they shared my perspectives.

We sought an independent voice to ask the questions. Dr. David Philpott, a retired professor at Memorial University, initially signed on to conduct a handful of interviews but ultimately spoke to dozens. This is appropriate. The story of how Canada adopted its early learning and child care plan can be told by many.

Canadians are known for being nice, and those interviewed said some very kind things about me and the work of our foundation—honestly, I'm honoured, and a little embarrassed. However, these recollections aren't just about me; they represent our collective efforts and what we've built together. I want to acknowledge that.

Now, through David, I am pleased to pass the microphone to them to tell their stories.

Receiving a call to assist with this book was such a joy. My career in special education with school-aged children spans nearly 40 years. About halfway through, I discovered the early years studies and similar research, which led to the realization that *earlier* identification and intervention through quality early learning could preempt much of the need for special education in the K-12 system. The research also connected me with remarkable people, many of whom I had the opportunity to speak with during the preparation of this book and during a previous project.

A few years ago, I was asked to evaluate[92] the *Early Childhood Education Report (ECER)*, an initiative at the University of Toronto supported by the McCain, Atkinson, and Lawson foundations. The report regularly tracks progress in early childhood education across provinces and territories.

I was to interview officials and others about their perceptions of the ECER and how they used it. The project aimed to involve 20 to 25 individuals, but ultimately included 93. Participants brought colleagues to their interviews or connected me with others who "really needed to speak to this." History repeated itself for this book, as the initial handful grew to 43 interviews and could have easily included more.

The foundation works across political parties, governments, provinces and territories, communities, institutions, organizations, and stakeholders. If you have been even tangentially involved in this journey, you will understand that accolades are not what these individuals seek. However, people spoke effusively about their experiences. Pride pairs with appreciation, but the frequency of the word "we" stands out as the best accolade of all.

Dr. David Philpott
April 2025

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Making Connections

The connection people felt with the McCain team was evident in every interview. They spoke as colleagues and friends, praising the foundation's accessibility, eagerness to help, personal concern, and sincerity in offering support. People described their relationships with the McCain team as "good friends." This wasn't because of the generosity of resources, but rather the generosity of time.

> When advocating for policy, relationships and connections are crucial. Building rapport with policymakers and identifying the right levers is essential. Margie and her foundation are well-known and respected. Patience is also necessary. You need someone with a proven track record, and McCain possessed that.
>
> ***Landon Pearson**, Canadian Senator, Children's rights advocate (d.28 January, 2023)*

> McCain was incredibly generous in sharing resources—not just money, but people like Jane and Kerry. I could call them at a moment's notice for help. They were always accessible and provided timely responses. I'd text them during a meeting and receive an answer before it ended. Margaret fully supported them in their work. Without this foundation and Margaret giving us access to a pan-Canadian network, along with their influence on policy and programming, I don't believe we would be where we are in BC today.
>
> ***Maureen Dockendorf**, Ministry of Education, Early Care and Learning Consultant, British Columbia*

> McCain practices trust-based philanthropy. They sat at the table and brought their assets, and the organizations they were working with contributed theirs. They worked together in a very mindful manner. They didn't presume to know what the outcomes would be, but they remained open to learning what was effective, what wasn't, and how they needed to adapt and adjust to ensure that

everyone achieved healthy outcomes. They focused on building relationships, and that effort will endure for a long time.

***Hilary Pearson**, Founding President of Philanthropic Foundations Canada*

I watched successive conservative governments in New Brunswick become convinced by her. They all reached into their treasuries and made the investment. I've spoken to political leaders from various parties, all of whom agree that she is a force to be reckoned with. Margie has done it again with the federal government, which recently made the largest investment in social policy since Medicare or Family Allowance.

***Frank McKenna**, Deputy Chairman of the Toronto-Dominion Bank, Former Premier of New Brunswick, and Ambassador to the United States*

Empowering Others

People talked about feeling empowered by the foundation, being positioned for success, and receiving credit and praise for their achievements. The outcome was an army of individuals who were committed to enhancing the lives of children and families with confidence and determination.

Margaret mentored me in setting up and launching my foundation. I knew that I could call on her with any question, and she was very accessible all the time. I didn't do exactly what she was doing, but I listened to her, and she listened to me. We needed a lot of support and advice, and they were there. They made endless visits and were boots on the ground whenever we needed them. It felt like an old friend was coming to hold my hand.

***Kathy Legrow**, Chair of the Board of the Jimmy Pratt Foundation*

> McCain has taught me not to go into a battle expecting to win the war that day. You plant a seed, nurture it, and let it grow. I've watched them do this again and again. It has been a huge professional gift to me.
>
> ***Nicole Gervais**, Executive Director/Senior Strategist, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, New Brunswick*

> I've always seen the McCain Foundation as a trinity of Margaret, Jane, and Kerry, each with unique yet complementary skills, sharing a common focus and deep commitment, and working very, very well together. None of them wanted recognition or credit, deferring to the foundation as a whole and focusing on empowering others. Time was never wasted with any of them basking in what was accomplished; rather, they celebrated everyone around them.
>
> ***Dr. Christine Alden**, Program Director, The Lawson Foundation*

> There's a wonderful saying in philanthropy: It's amazing what you can accomplish when you don't need to take credit for it. Margie personifies this—she is so focused and extremely humble about it.
>
> ***Lyn Baptist**, Past Chair of The JW McConnell Family Foundation, Board Member of the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc.*

Meaningful Collaboration

The foundation didn't aim to impose a model on the regions. Instead its goal is to assist them in developing their own approaches based on their specific circumstances. People reported that they "worked with" the foundation's staff, who were genuinely interested in the regions and eager to build upon local ideas and initiatives. Stakeholders and government officials came to trust the activities supported by the foundation and regarded it as a dependable resource.

We were becoming the incubator for many of the ideas that had come out of Toronto First Duty. It wasn't a Margie McCain project or a McCain Foundation project; it was a New Brunswick project with the support and guidance of the McCains. We owned it, and they were eager to profile our success. They gave credit to everyone except themselves. It was always a sense of a team that you were proud to be on.

***Shawn Graham**, Former Premier of New Brunswick*

McCain was particularly gifted at knowing the limitations of their knowledge and surrounding themselves with people with that knowledge. They accessed first-rate people, top-quality researchers and advisors. One of Margaret's remarkable strengths is being able to find the right people.

***Charles Pascal**, Professor Emeritus at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (d.24 April, 2023)*

The Prime Minister had asked us to bring bold ideas, so in April 2020, I walked into his office and said, "Let's build a national child-care program." To his credit, he didn't say no, and he didn't say yes. He said, "Go build your case." In building that case, I relied on my department, but I also relied heavily on the McCain Foundation.

***Honourable Ahmed Hussen**, Minister of International Development, former Minister of Families, Children and Social Development*

McCain was consistently seeking ways to connect foundations, governments of all kinds, and the private sector to genuinely enhance the lives of children and families. They expanded their influence in Kettle Point with Paul Martin's Foundation, which wanted to improve literacy levels among Indigenous children. Margie recognized that to enhance literacy in school children, it is essential to focus on the early years. McCain collaborated with the Martin Foundation, which worked with school-aged children, while McCain focused on preschool children. It was a well-aimed

plan to help the Martin Foundation realize it needed to prioritize the early years to improve literacy outcomes.

***Dr. Carl Corter**, Professor Emeritus at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study at the University of Toronto*

In the 1990s, the Lawson Foundation was already working with people like Fraser Mustard and Clyde Hertzman, funding various initiatives in the sector to translate the science into better practice. When Lawson partnered with McCain, that work expanded. It was the McCain Foundation that brought the [Early Child Development] Funders Working Group together to support the *Early Years Study 3*, which launched the *Early Childhood Education Report*. That became the catalyst for all our foundations to start working together.

***Dr. Christine Alden**, Program Director, The Lawson Foundation*

A foundation's biggest capital is not money but its relationships and capacity to convene different folks, connect networks, get people talking, and leverage research. That is what leads to social change and policy change. Foundations are catalysts.

***Jean-Marc Chouinard**, Former President, Lucie and André Changnon Foundation*

Garnering the Evidence

This theme earned the foundation significant recognition for its unique approach. The work was not the vision of a single individual but was guided by research and the application of knowledge to inform public policy. They gathered researchers, built a compelling argument, and connected that knowledge to practice. When gaps in understanding existed, they commissioned researchers to investigate further. When there was hesitancy in applying the knowledge, they funded demonstration sites and invited people to witness the outcomes.

The early years studies have been groundbreaking. The first one with Fraser created a real shift in making the science available and accessible to policymakers and practitioners in the field. It served as a uniting document that people could easily understand. From this, networks were established to highlight the science, identify gaps, advocate for more research, and pinpoint the "implementables" that people could learn from. The subsequent reports just built and built the knowledge base, amassing an incredible volume of extremely helpful and impactful insights.

***Dr. Robin Williams**, Pediatrician and public health specialist, former Medical Officer of Health, Niagara Region*

McCain placed such an emphasis on evidence. This partly stemmed from Margie's association with Fraser Mustard, but it didn't originate there. The Fergusson Foundation prioritized the issue of family violence through research, public education, and various programs. Margie understood governance and the connection between research and shifting public opinion 40 years ago. She replicated this approach in the McCain Foundation and advanced it further. She recognized the crucial role of foundations in convening other funders, influencing public policy, and fostering alliances among researchers and their work.

***Wade MacLauchlan**, Former Premier of Prince Edward Island*

A big spotlight has been cast on the early years, and the foundation deserves much credit for this. It has showcased the importance of evidence-based decision-making, the connection between research and policy, and the role of partnerships in closing these loops.

***Dr. Jessie-Lee MacIsaac**, Associate Professor and Tier II Canada Research Chair in Early Childhood: Diversity and Transitions, Faculty of Education and Department of Child and Youth Study, Mount Saint Vincent University*

There has been a groundswell of interest in and awareness of quality early childhood education in the country. Margaret McCain and

> the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation deserves much credit for this. They have really raised awareness of and access to knowledge. They have been major social influencers, successfully engaging people to listen. This has been enormously helpful in our efforts to improve the lives of young families.
>
> ***Dr. Jennifer Jenkins**, Atkinson Chair of Early Child Development & Education at the University of Toronto*

> For a layperson to engage in the academic world, as Margaret has, is quite unique. She funded research, disseminated it, and then brought it to the politicians, saying, "Look at what we have learned!" She is certainly on the record as having great respect for academia. The foundation popularized the science of early learning and used it to promote well-informed and grounded advocacy.
>
> ***Dr. Ramona Lumpkin**, Former President and Vice-Chancellor of Mount Saint Vincent University, Board Member at the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc.*

Sharing the Knowledge

Gathering the evidence was one thing, but amplifying the voice was another. The science was pushed out, and researchers, along with those on the ground working with children and families, were supported in presenting the findings. They framed early learning and child care as community and economic issues, curating key speakers to attract the attention of politicians and influencers. It worked, and unusual allies began to listen. The foundation excelled at identifying levers and knowing when to use them to reach the right audiences.

> McCain's evidence base was critical to its success. The cornerstone of their argument was the economic benefits. They took Jim Heckman's argument of the return on investment, and then Gordon Cleveland, Pierre Fortin, and Craig Alexander came to the podium and presented evidence in a way that was accessible

to the public. McCain made sure that knowledge was useful and placed on the right tables and in a way that you felt like you were at a kitchen table.

***Dr. Jean Clinton**, Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences at McMaster, Division of Child Psychiatry*

During the pandemic, when the Prosperity Project was helping inform how to establish child care to enable parents to return to work and restart the economy, the McCain Foundation was there. It had the evidence for what quality early education should look like and the science to defend it. Industry leaders and politicians paid attention because McCain was so well-established, informed, and articulate. The early years studies and the early childhood education reports outlined the argument and the way forward. Margie's name being associated with it was especially beneficial because she is highly respected for her work, not merely her name. When several federal ministers speak of someone with that level of respect, the impact is huge.

***Penny Collenette**, Co-chair of The Prosperity Project Childcare and Early Childhood Education Advisory Group*

Margaret brought Fraser to PEI around 2006 or 2007. I was president of UPEI at the time. It was attended by politicians, academics, and private industry representatives. It was not a show-and-tell but rather a highly planned and effective meeting that ultimately made early learning a government priority. Kindergarten came into the schools, CHANCES scaled up, and many initiatives progressed rapidly after that meeting. The government implemented significant changes and began to get good grades on the ECE Report, which they ran with and which informed other provinces.

***Wade MacLauchlan**, Former Premier of Prince Edward Island*

Early childhood education has always been a topic that impacts people's lives and is important from both social and economic

perspectives. McCain has consistently supported the work, and we have enjoyed a mutually beneficial working relationship where we strive to present timely and significant ideas for Canadians.

***Honourable Andrew Cardozo**, Canadian Senator, former President and Co-founder of the Pearson Centre for Progressive Policy*

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Communicating the Science

Margaret is often credited as "Fraser's translator." She had a talent for breaking down complex science into accessible sound bites that people could understand and use. She helped change how academics disseminate knowledge. Education was reimagined to begin in the early years, establishing a trajectory for a child's future. The foundation helped inform the federal government in the lead-up to the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreements. People admire how effectively this was accomplished.

A few years ago, I had the pleasure of attending an OECD forum on the early years to present my work. Margie gave the keynote on day two. Everyone knew who she was and knew the work of the foundation. I knew she was a champion in Canada, but I hadn't fully appreciated the extent of her international recognition and stature. I was not surprised when the federal government specifically named her in their 2021 budget announcement and plans for child care.

***Craig Alexander**, Chief Economist at Deloitte Canada*

Our readership is broad, with a very large non-domestic audience. McCain's issues are real-world, attracting a wide base of interest. These are not just Canadian issues; they are issues that transcend borders, even if the policies differ.

***Scott White**, Former Editor, The Conversation Canada*

There is now a much broader understanding of the benefits of early childhood education. All political parties have been engaged. Significant advocacy has been undertaken to help people comprehend the evidence behind the arguments. Once you grasp that evidence, it becomes a no-brainer. I often use this quote: "Politicians plan for the next election. Statesmen plan for the next generation." That's what we were doing.

***Carol Loughrey**, Former Deputy Minister for New Brunswick, Board Member Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc.*

McCain changed the discourse. Suddenly, scientific knowledge on how young children learn was being discussed in the board rooms, at the water coolers, in carpools, and at kitchen tables.

***Penny Collenette**, Co-chair of The Prosperity Project Childcare and Early Childhood Education Advisory Group*

Writing the *Early Years Study 2* was an intense process. It started with Fraser and me roughing out the broad ideas and then Margaret reading everything and adding her own notes. She was especially helpful in getting us to clarify complex scientific ideas. She was working as a "knowledge engineer" to ensure the message was clear and accessible. She is listed as a co-author because she was a co-author in the deepest sense of the term.

***Dr. Stuart Shanker**, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Psychology at York University, Founder/CEO of The MEHRIT Centre*

The Toronto First Duty project would not have had the impact it did without the foundation promoting it. I met people from all over the world who knew about this project. The early years studies and the *Early Childhood Education Report* have continued this extensive translation and dissemination of research, and it has proven to be incredibly effective.

***Dr. Carl Corter**, Professor Emeritus at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study at the University of Toronto*

Personal Commitment

Margaret earns credit for suiting up, showing up, and being fully engaged in doing as much as she asks of others. She is widely recognized for her social influence and for strategically using it to open doors and engage people. There is substantial evidence that her personal charisma facilitated access.

> Margie's willingness to engage on the front lines, to personally meet with people and be the face and voice of the work, was unusual in the world of philanthropy. She was fully aware of the difference her personal involvement could make and used her positions and prominence judiciously. Her well-earned expertise certainly made an impact.
>
> ***Hilary Pearson**, Founding President of Philanthropic Foundations Canada*

> We held a provincial summit on early childhood education in 2013 with a deliberate focus on engaging the private sector, businesses, and philanthropy. Margie attended and delivered a keynote address. It was shortly after she had lost both Fraser and Wallace, and she spoke so poignantly, sharing how those two significant figures in her life brought out the best in her. It was incredibly moving, and she got people talking because she was walking the talk. It wasn't just about her work or that she was using her family's resources; it was really a well-designed message intended to have an impact. This was not a side gig for her. That summit was a game-changer, and its ripples are still being felt.
>
> ***Rob Santos**, Former Assistant Deputy Minister of the Healthy Child Manitoba Office, Assistant Deputy Minister of K-12 Education*

> Margie has taught me to never lose sight of where you come from and who you are. No matter what you do, where you go, what you accomplish, you have to stay true to your roots and your core values. Margie never lost sight of that. You see it etched on everything she does and everyone she meets. I've been around

a lot of successful people whose oars no longer touch the water. Margie's oars are very much in the water.

***Stephen McNeil**, Former Premier of Nova Scotia*

It is not an overreach to say that those federal agreements are almost entirely due to the foundation and Margie's systematic approach. They put the seed money in, funded the research, travelled the country, and rolled up their sleeves with one premier and one government at a time. 2021 might have been the cumulation of it, but it was 20 years of in-the-trenches, hard labour that got us here. Margie got her hands under the hood. She was out there every day.

***Frank McKenna**, Former Premier of New Brunswick*

I remember one time I was asked to give a lecture to the World Bank. There had been a big storm, the airports were closed, and nothing was moving, but Fraser absolutely insisted I go. I ended up renting a car and driving to Washington, DC. The next morning, I got a message from Margie thanking me for making the effort. She was hearing good news from others about my talk. It was that balancing of her kindness and nurturing with Fraser's tyrannical insistence that moved relationships forward.

***Dr. Stuart Shanker**, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Psychology at York University, Founder/CEO of The MEHRIT Centre*

In 2008, the Graham government set out to develop a provincial poverty reduction strategy. We established a broad process with people who travelled the province to gather insights from diverse areas and perspectives. One of the many themes that emerged was early childhood development. It wasn't the only tool in the toolbox, but it was a strong, recurrent one. We held a forum with about 50 politicians, business and community leaders, individuals with lived experience, academics, and Margaret McCain. The group negotiated for two days, pouring over the terms of a poverty reduction plan, understanding that everyone needed to do their share. When we got to the section regarding early childhood

development, Mrs. McCain raised her hand and said her foundation would fund several early years centres to kick-start the initiative. That commitment gave a level of legitimacy and momentum to the plan. It lasted for ten years through numerous governments and has produced long-lasting, profound change for the province.

***James Hughes**, Former Deputy Minister, New Brunswick's Department of Social Development*

Keeping Focused

Verna Bruce uses the quote, "Never underestimate the power of gentle pressure relentlessly applied" to describe Margaret's style. This "laser-like focus" is attributed to the foundation's achievements.

As a philanthropic foundation, McCain's focus was unique. They zoned in on the early years with a passion. They funded research, educated the population, and pushed for very specific policy development. That is unique, important, and incredibly helpful within the OECD.

***Tove Mogstad Slinde**, Former Chair of the Network on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*

We are a country of pilots. Everybody has an idea, and they go out and try it, but that isn't how to grow a system. We have needed the McCain team to stay focused on what's valid, what works, and how we can learn from one another. If we are going to shape-shift Canadian childhood, it's got to be more than a couple of pilots.

***Dr. Robin Williams**, Pediatrician and public health specialist, former Medical Officer of Health, Niagara Region*

Margie mastered the research before she spoke about it, and she was fiercely true to it. If someone tried to nuance the research

or twist it to their advantage, she called them on it. There was a power about Margie that no one dismissed. You knew she was the real thing.

***James Hughes**, Former Deputy Minister, New Brunswick's Department of Social Development*

I watch a lot of foundations, and they usually come across as rather unfocused and diverse in what they do. McCain was the opposite, very focused and clear in what it wanted, and never moved from that. McCain demonstrates the difference between a shotgun approach and a laser beam, between fuzziness and clear, pursued goals.

***Dr. Pierre Fortin**, Professor Emeritus of Economics at the Université du Québec à Montréal*

Mom and Dad did lots of philanthropic work, but this was different and more focused. They sought out good advice. When she met Fraser Mustard, she decided this was the space that she wanted to focus on, and she has never lost that focus. It became her passion. Dad went to all the meetings and events. As he got older and retired, he increasingly wanted to show people that her causes were his causes as well, but he totally gave her the spotlight.

***Scott McCain**, Chair, Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc.*

McCain had a vision and followed through on it. They brought in the evidence, and their "stick-with-it-ness" made the difference. They have changed a whole system that will continue to grow. It isn't static; it will always evolve.

***Dr. Jan Pelletier**, Professor of Applied Psychology and Human Development at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study*

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Does it Work?

Every project the foundation undertook included an evaluation component, and all lessons, whether positive or negative, were shared. They encouraged others to monitor the outcomes of new practices. The *Early Childhood Education Report*, established by the consortium of foundations in the Early Child Development Funders Working Group, receives recognition for monitoring progress and tracking change. As a result, there is a national sense of vigilance regarding the evolution of a stronger early learning sector. No one could rest on their laurels; rather, fingers were held to the pulse.

> The *Early Childhood Education Report* has been a huge reminder of where we are going and what we are doing with the early years. It's become such a source of data and information for the country. Because of that report, we can measure progress and monitor quality.
>
> ***Dr. Jean Clinton**, Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences at McMaster, Division of Child Psychiatry*

> Much has been accomplished, but much remains undone. The reports and assessment tools are highly relevant, as the federal government has decided to move forward with establishing affordable childcare. Since this agenda will progress at varying paces across provinces and territories, monitoring policy implementation will be extremely beneficial. The missing link is the establishment of a pan-Canadian child development monitoring system that enables comparisons between provinces and territories to evaluate how individual young children are developing, especially those who are vulnerable and being left behind.
>
> ***Dr. Michel Boivin**, Canada Research Chair in Child Development, Professor of Psychology, Laval University*

Legacy

The foundation leaves a strong legacy on the importance of the early years and social responsibility, but, as importantly, on the impact a foundation can have.

These became an emotional aspect of the interviews, certainly a moment when individuals reflected on the bigger picture, what has been accomplished, and how much things have evolved.

> This legacy is simple: Any child that could have ended up as a ward of the state or a cause of concern to the provincial budget is today a contributing member of his/her community. Those are the hidden stories that will never be talked about or championed but are the true legacy of their work.
>
> ***Shawn Graham**, Former Premier of New Brunswick*

> McCain's work has disrupted the daycare sector for parents across the country. Children in Canada should receive the care they deserve because of their potential and their ability to contribute, not because they stand as an obstacle to a woman going to work. The foundation has elevated the value of early child educators. Men are now talking about early learning and why it is important for them to take care of their children.
>
> ***Cathy Bennett**, Former Minister of Finance, Status of Women, Human Resource Secretariat & President of Treasury Board, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador*

> They will leave many legacies, but their focus on partnerships is top among them. The McCain Foundation did not invest unless it had a true partnership with the province, with other foundations, or with community groups. They made it clear that they were always looking to establish relationships and build partnerships, which leaves an even longer-lasting legacy.
>
> ***Dr. Vianne Timmons**, OC*

Margie will always be recognized as the person who paved the way for a larger focus on early childhood development in Canada.

***David Dodge**, Former Governor of the Bank of Canada*

There is a profound legacy left by someone who fought the good fight for an accessible, affordable, and high-quality national childcare program. It wasn't a brief struggle; it was a long and challenging journey filled with many twists and turns. Thankfully, she didn't give up because I had the luck of knowing her at a time when I could make a difference. Through her leadership, mentorship, and friendship, I was able to set it in motion.

***Honourable Ahmed Hussen**, Minister of International Development, former Minister of Families, Children and Social Development*

I'm a grandfather now, and over the last few years, I've been taking my younger grandkids to childcare centres and Kindergarten in their neighbourhood school. I think about how all of this probably would not have happened were it not for the work of McCain.

***Dr. Carl Corter**, Professor Emeritus at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study at the University of Toronto*

I'm proud that in Mom's lifetime, she was able to see the turning point when the provinces and the federal government realized the importance of this investment and signed those agreements. All the work, all the reports, Mom travelling the country, meeting with politicians, it all came together and worked. Yes, there's work left to do, but the needle has moved—a lot.

***Scott McCain**, Chair, Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc.*

Acknowledgements

Someone once referred to Jane Bertrand, Kerry McCuaig, and me as a triumvirate. They are part of my second team of three. The first was formed with my husband Wallace and Dr. Fraser Mustard. Wallace provided me with love, a family, and means, while Fraser offered me knowledge and guidance. They stood beside me as I wrote this book.

I cannot thank my family enough for their encouragement. They have carried me through difficult times and are the source of all my joy. They backed this work long before the foundation was conceptualized and have held my hand every step of the way since. I am especially grateful to my son Scott, who has stepped in as the foundation's new chair to lead in the years ahead.

The foundation has been enriched by the knowledge and skills of a remarkable board of directors made up of family and non-family members. They are seldom seen and infrequently heard, yet they remain consistently diligent and committed to their stewardship.

As with everything related to our foundation, this book is a collaborative effort. Acknowledging individuals can be risky, but there are a few I must recognize.

It is difficult to imagine how this story could have been written without Jane and Kerry. They are my "Google ladies", always ready with timely information. David Philpott did an exceptional job conducting over 40 interviews with some of those who took this journey with us.

I conclude with what is most important—those who share the vision of universal high-quality early education: the educators, advocates, community leaders, politicians, government officials, economists, business leaders, parents, students, and academics who eagerly work for the benefit of our children. Thank you.

Margaret Norrie McCain
April 2025

About the Author

The **Honourable Margaret Norrie McCain** is the founding chair and current Chair Emerita of the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc. The Foundation's mission is to champion effective early childhood programs across Canada—programs that provide equal opportunities for all children, align with the school system, and operate within a provincial or territorial framework.

Born on October 1, 1934, in northern Quebec, Margaret's father, James Paul Norrie, was a prominent mining engineer during the early days of the Quebec gold mining industry and was inducted into the Canadian Mining Hall of Fame. Her mother, Senator Margaret Norrie of Truro, Nova Scotia, was the fifth woman appointed to the Canadian Senate and widely respected for her commitment to social justice.

Margaret received her early education in Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Ontario. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honours in History from Mount Allison University in Sackville, and a Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Toronto. In 1955, she married Wallace McCain from Florenceville, New Brunswick. Together, they raised four children, who gave them nine grandchildren. By the end of 2025, there will be 18 great-grandchildren.

Throughout her career, she has actively addressed family violence while promoting early education, music, and the arts. She served as a member of the Mount Allison University Board of Regents from 1974 to 1994 and held the position of Chancellor from 1986 to 1994. She is a founding

member of the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Foundation, dedicated to eliminating family violence through public education and research. Margaret chaired its capital campaign to establish a Family Violence Research Centre in partnership with the University of New Brunswick.

On April 28, 1994, Margaret was appointed as the Lieutenant Governor of the Province of New Brunswick, becoming the first woman to hold the position.

Margaret served on the Board of the National Ballet School for 18 years, acting as its Chair from 1998 to 2000. She led the successful $100 million fundraising campaign for the school.

In April 1998, Ontario's Secretariat for Children appointed her as co-chair of the *Early Years Study* alongside Dr. Fraser Mustard. That report proved to be a game-changer in Canada by presenting the science behind early learning in an accessible manner. It went on to launch several follow-up reports that helped shift public awareness in Canada regarding the science of early learning and the necessity of strong public policy.

In 2002, she co-chaired a Commission on Early Learning and Child Development for the City of Toronto. She has been involved in numerous early childhood development policy and program initiatives in Canada and is a sought-after speaker at national and international conferences. She has received Honorary Degrees from several prominent Canadian universities.

Of all the accolades and salutations that have come her way, the ones she cherishes the most are "mum, nanny, nana, and GG."

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McCain, M. N., Mustard, J. F., & McCuaig, K. (2011). *Early Years Study 3: Making decisions, taking action*. Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc.

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Honorary degrees

Doctorate in Education

- Nipissing University
- Université de Moncton

Doctorate in Psychology

- Université Laval

Doctor of Laws

- Dalhousie University
- Mount Allison University
- Mount St. Vincent University
- University of New Brunswick
- University of Toronto
- Ryerson University
- St. Thomas University
- Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University)
- Trent University York University

Fellows

- University of Waterloo (Renison University College)

Diplomas

- Loyalist College
- Sheridan College
- University of Toronto (Wycliffe College)

Awards

Companion of the Order of Canada (2014)

Officer of the Order of Canada (1998)

100 Most Powerful Canadian Women Award

Association of Fund-Raising Professionals—Outstanding Philanthropist Award

ECE Award of Excellence, School of Early Childhood, George Brown College

The Family Resource Association Award

Fraser Mustard Award—Toronto Foundation for Student Success

Member of the Order of New Brunswick

Muriel McQueen Fergusson Foundation Award

Public Policy Forum Award

St. George's Society Award of Merit

The Canadian Red Cross Humanitarian Award

The Learning Partnership Award

Toronto YWCA 2005 Women of Distinction Award

Trailblazer Award—Women's College Hospital

Yorktown Family Service Partnership Award

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What if the key to a stronger, more just society lies in the earliest years of a child's life?

For decades, the **Honourable Margaret Norrie McCain** has been a driving force for change, championing the power of early education to shape brighter futures. As a trailblazer in public service and philanthropy, she has dedicated her life to advancing social justice, breaking barriers, and ensuring that all children—regardless of circumstance—can thrive.

In *Giving for Change*, Margaret shares the deeply personal and profoundly impactful story of her philanthropic journey. Drawing on her leadership with the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc., she offers an insider's perspective on how strategic giving influences policy, transforms communities, and fosters lasting social progress.

More than just a reflection, this book answers the many questions she is asked about her foundation's work and its mission—offering a powerful call to action for anyone who believes in the transformative potential of investing in children.

Inspiring, thought-provoking, and deeply hopeful, *Giving for Change* is a must-read for educators, policymakers, philanthropists, and all who dream of a better future—starting from the very beginning.

Mrs. McCain is a true Canadian for all the country and not just an "outside Quebec Canadian." She cares for and is truly interested in Quebec and its lessons that can help the rest of the country.

—**Dr. Pierre Fortin**, Professor Emeritus of Economics at the Université du Québec.

The McCains are well-known but not widely known. They always put the message and the work ahead of the brand. It was about having the message disseminated, not telling how it happened or who paid for it.

—**Dr. Rob Santos**, Former Assistant Deputy Minister of the Healthy Child Manitoba Office and Assistant Deputy Minister of K-12 Education.

Kids had never been very relevant in political campaigns and elections; they didn't impact votes, and they didn't have a voice. Margaret gave them a voice.

—**Cathy Bennett**, Former Minister of Finance, Status of Women, Human Resource Secretariat & President of Treasury Board. Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.

MWM

Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc.