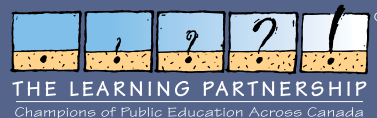


THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN CANADA



A Need for Action

This report outlines where we are in Canada with regard to early learning and school readiness, especially in relation to three- to five-year olds. It is based on a research paper prepared for The Learning Partnership's *Early Years Conference* in Toronto in January 2007. Through this report we want to increase awareness among Canadians about the importance of early learning and what we can do to support families in raising healthy, school-ready children. We are particularly concerned about how we can provide early learning opportunities for children in difficult socio-economic circumstances, as well as the growing numbers of Aboriginal and immigrant children. The report also deals with ways to measure the success and school-readiness of young children. Finally, this report provides a sample of practices and suggestions for action for governments, educators, communities and parents.



School Readiness: A Marker that Matters

Each year 520,000 children in Canada enter Grade One, beginning their formal academic careers. The majority of those children are ready for school. They come to school healthy, well-rested, and well-fed; curious, eager to learn from new experiences, able to follow their teacher's instructions, and to work co-operatively with other children. They have been read to at home, have been involved in creative activities such as colouring or painting, and have age-appropriate language skills and general knowledge.

But more than one-quarter of our children arrive at their first day of school with social, behavioural and learning difficulties already so entrenched that those problems will affect their entire academic experience. Children who exhibit learning and social challenges at age five are more likely to drop out of high school than those who come to school ready to learn. Because formal education contributes to literacy, health, the work we do, how much we earn, and even our capacity to be good parents and active citizens, school readiness

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How to Use this Report

This is the fourth *Progress Report on the Quality of Public Education*. It is published by The Learning Partnership (TLP), a national, not-for-profit organization dedicated to supporting public education in Canada and to facilitating discussion about issues that affect all aspects of students' well-being and education. The Learning Partnership has developed its commitment to early learning through both research and programming.

This *Progress Report* is intended for parents, educators, school boards, community and business leaders, agencies and policymakers in all orders of government. We encourage all Canadians to use this report as a blueprint for sharing ideas during formal and informal discussion, for knowledge exchange in workshops and courses, and, ultimately, to develop valuable public policy responses to the challenges we have identified.

To download and circulate a copy of this and previous reports, please visit the publications section of the TLP website.

Comment

The Learning Partnership (TLP) is concerned with all aspects of a student's well being and education, from the early years to graduation. The early years, however, are of particular interest as the foundation for the future success of students as they grow to adulthood. Previous issues of our *Progress Report on the Quality of Public Education* in Canada have recognized that a child's success depends in large measure on early learning experiences.

That's why TLP initiated its *Welcome to Kindergarten™* (WTK) program. The program provides preschool children and their families with resources and information to help children become ready for formal learning by making early learning experiences and activities a priority in their homes. More than 50,000 families across the country have received books, markers and other resources to support their children's language and literacy skills, and to support early learning development in order to help position them for school success.

Our work on students at risk and on demographic change in Canada has also prompted TLP to focus specifically on the importance of early learning and school readiness for the rapidly growing numbers of Aboriginal and immigrant children. Despite the strength

of our diversity, the social and economic risks associated with these vulnerable groups are high. Improving the future prospects of all Canadian children is, therefore, vital for Canadian society as a whole.

TLP encourages everyone who is concerned about our youngest citizens to share the information in this report with decision makers throughout the country. We welcome your comments. We hope this report will help further the dialogue on how to provide the best early learning experiences for Canada's children. ■



The Magical Years

Getting Ready

A child's first five years are magical ones for human development. An explosion of research over the past 10 years documents the dynamic partnership between genes that influence individual potential, and a child's environment. Together, they mould the young child's brain, establishing the neural connections that provide the foundation for language, reasoning, problem-solving, social skills, behaviour, and physical and emotional health. Children's earliest experiences and environments set the stage for their later development and success in school and in life.

School readiness, therefore, begins to be influenced in the womb, with

the genetic template both parents provide, and with the health and well-being of the mother. Children are born ready to learn, with their neurological wiring programmed to develop specific skills and neuro-pathways. Following birth, a child's home environment, the way it is parented, its family's socio-economic situation, its community and the values and policies of society all influence the way a child develops.

Despite the scientific evidence for understanding early childhood as the prime period for learning and social / emotional development, the field is controversial. Our society generally accepts the importance of early learning and play for young

continued on page 4

School Readiness: A Marker that Matters

continued from page 1

and school completion are markers that matter.

An abandoned education is a tragedy for an individual and signals under-utilized human potential for the country. As a society, we are concerned about the value of completing a high school education. Gaining the skills required for life-long learning in our knowledge economy must begin with a foundation that ensures success: the building blocks that prepare young children for school.

Reducing the numbers of children who are vulnerable to school failure requires a national vision, coherent policies and a substantial financial commitment. Despite

attempts to promote a dialogue about what Canadians want in the way of early childhood education and care for their children, policymakers, educators, parents and the public remain conflicted about how best to prepare young children for school. Who should be responsible for early childhood education? What should be done to provide the best educational and developmental start for Canada's youngest children? What do the programs that prepare children most effectively look like? These are some of the questions shaping the debate on early learning in Canada. ■

Exemplary Practice

Manitoba has the only cabinet committee in Canada dedicated entirely to the well-being of children and youth. The committee has established a budget process designed to allocate provincial expenditures to evidence-based programs. Along with Quebec, Manitoba has improved compensation and enhanced training requirements for staff in early childhood settings, financed public campaigns about the importance of early childhood development, and increased the number of child care spaces.

The Magical Years

continued from page 3

children. There is less agreement, however, about the content of preschool programs for young children, how to assess their readiness for school, and what role governments should play, if any, in developing and providing preschool programs.

The goal of high-quality early learning environments for children three-to-five should be to address the needs of the whole child, in the home, in early learning and child care programs, in Kindergarten and through support programs directed at both child and parents or guardians.

The Building Blocks of Learning

Many of the children who enter Grade One do not have the foundation to prepare them for their school career, according to the range of findings contained in a number of recent surveys. Through screening and assessment tools that Kindergarten teachers use (see the Early Development Instrument, discussed on page 8), it has become clear that some pockets of the population are more likely to lack school readiness, such as children who live in an Aboriginal family or in a family whose home language is other than English or French.

Other risk factors for lacking school readiness include low socio-economic status, living in high-risk neighbourhoods, and experiencing high levels of family stress. The risks increase when more than one factor is present. Identifying how best to address the needs of the most vulnerable children remains a central challenge.

Beyond the nest

International and Canadian research has demonstrated that what children learn once they begin to participate in nursery, preschool, Kindergarten, child-care and other programs outside the home plays an important role in later success. The question is not whether we should prepare children for school, but how.

Educators, researchers and parents have been engaged in a longstanding debate about whether early childhood education should be based on a traditional, didactic approach that involves formal, teacher-directed instruction, or on an informal, play-based approach, involving activities that children initiate and teachers support.

Internationally, approaches differ. Europeans have tended to focus on an informal approach that focuses on 'the whole child.' Programs in the United States tend to be more didactic, with an emphasis on standardized curricula and testing. Canada's approach is somewhere in the middle. While educators and ministries of education promote a focus on the whole child, it appears that pressures from a range of stakeholders, including parents, are resulting in a demand for programs that are strongly skill-based rather than based on a holistic approach.

American educator E. D. Hirsch argues, in *The Schools We Need*, for a formal approach. He states that "a good, academically focused preschool program can

International and Canadian research has demonstrated that what children learn once they begin to participate in nursery, preschool, Kindergarten, child-care and other programs outside the home plays an important role in later success.

Exemplary Practice

overcome the egregious academic differences that currently develop between social classes in American schools.” The persistent academic achievement gap between various groups of children in the United States has fueled the popularity of promoting rigid grade-by-grade curriculum guidelines that explicitly state the knowledge children are expected to achieve, beginning in pre-Kindergarten.

In the United States, the federal *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* law was designed to improve the performance of all American schools, especially those with low results on standardized testing. The legislation purports to increase accountability standards, provide parents with greater school choice, and promote an increased focus on reading and math. Results from standardized testing determine the level of federal funding that schools receive (in many cases with the result that school boards have

directed educators to “teach to the test”). Since the legislation came into effect, however, American secondary students have fallen to last place in international reading and math assessments. Test results in Grades 4 and 8 indicate that the same achievement gap persists between African-American and Hispanic students and their white peers — a poor outcome for a policy promising to level the academic playing field for minority children.

International comparisons indicate that children demonstrate better longer-term outcomes when early childhood programs promote physical, emotional and social development. High school students from Finland and Japan consistently out-perform their peers in international testing of reading, science, math and problem-solving. Finland, a top scorer in all three categories, has an extensive, play-based early childhood system.

Finnish children are not formally taught to read until primary school, which begins at age seven. Reviews of preschool and Grade One program in Japan found that children spend more than half of their day in free play. Fewer than two percent of Finnish and Japanese students fail to complete high school.

In Canada, however, one out of every 10 students does not graduate. The discrepancy in the dropout rate is disturbing and significant.

Dr. Fraser Mustard, a Canadian physician and leader in the scientific investigation of infant

Welcome to Kindergarten™, (WTK) is a program The Learning Partnership offers. It provides literacy early learning resources and experiences to more than 50,000 families of young children across the country each year. Before starting Kindergarten, children and parents/caregivers attend a WTK orientation at their neighbourhood school. During the orientation, parents and caregivers learn strategies and activities for using the resources provided in a WTK bag that they take home, so they can continue the activities. Families connect with Kindergarten teachers, school resource personnel and community agency staff, who train them to engage in activities that support young children in the transition to school.



“Early education should target the whole, active child and not just isolated cognitive skills. Programs should create playful environments rich with opportunities for exploration.”

Dr. Fraser Mustard, Physician and leader in the science of infant brain development.

brain development, bemoans that his *Early Years Study* (1999) has been used to justify an academic focus in early childhood programming. “Early education should target the whole, active child and not just isolated cognitive skills. Programs should create playful environments rich with opportunities for exploration,” he says. Mustard’s *Early Years Study 2*, released in 2007, presents play as the medium through which young children develop a suite of academic, social and physical skills. He documents the need to integrate parents into children’s early learning programs, and says doing so produces the most successful outcomes.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek is a leading U.S. critic of the trend to compartmentalize academic learning for preschool children. In *Einstein Never Used Flash Cards*, she calls this movement the “cult of achievement and the loss of childhood.” Her book reviews research that indicates:

- Children who are prematurely pushed into regimented academic instruction display less creativity and enthusiasm for learning in later years;
- Children who memorize isolated facts early in life show no better long-term retention than their peers; and
- Children who learn through play also develop social skills and emotional abilities, which are critical for long-term success.

Failure to acquire emotional and social skills can be as or more,

detrimental to children’s school outcomes as failing to acquire academic skills. By age five, children who are disruptive or aggressive tend to be rejected by their classmates and have more conflict-ridden relationships with their teachers, according to researchers B. Hamre and R. Pianta in *Child Development*, 72.

Preschool curriculum studies that began in the United States in the 1970’s demonstrated that children in direct instruction programs intellectually outperformed those from programs stressing child-initiated activities only up to a year after the preschool program, but not thereafter. The studies indicated that more nursery school children who engaged in child-initiated activities with minimal teacher support graduated from high school than those who received direct instruction.



Current wisdom is based on the understanding that early learning and development are multidimensional. Children learn and develop across cognitive, emotional and physical domains simultaneously. As such, those developing strategies for early learning programs should consider the various domains of the “whole child.” The best early learning environments respect that diversity in terms of teaching approaches and developmental experiences.

These environments are also play-based. A good play-based early learning environment is structured so that whatever the child does, observes or manipulates becomes a tool for learning a specific skill. Such programs manage to balance overall developmental and social skills with age-appropriate cognitive knowledge. ■

Measuring Readiness for School

Considerable international research exists about early learning. The United Kingdom, Sweden, Australia and the United States draw on data from longitudinal studies stretching back over four decades. Although Canada is a relative newcomer to large-scale research about young children, several major sources provide information about the well-being of Canada’s children and how ready they are for school. Three of those significant sources are described below.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) conducted by Statistics Canada and sponsored by Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC), assesses the well-being and development of children and youth in Canada from infancy to adulthood. The study has followed a representative sample of approximately 23,000 children aged 0-11 since 1994. Data is gathered on health, developmental, cognitive and social outcomes

and relationships; family and neighbourhood characteristics including parenting styles and the availability of social support; and the children’s school experience and participation in sports and other activities. Data on preschool children focuses on birth weight and complications; motor and social development, vocabulary, and behaviour. Children are considered vulnerable if they have at least one serious learning or behavioural problem.

L’Étude longitudinale du développement des enfants du Québec (ELDEQ) has tracked 2000 Quebec families since 1998, assessing children at five months, 17 months and four years. The study is designed to identify the factors influencing children’s development and their psychosocial adaptation to the environment; and to provide increased understanding as well as preventative strategies to reduce child abuse and maladaptive behaviour in young people.

Children learn and develop across cognitive, emotional and physical domains simultaneously. As such, those developing strategies for early learning programs should consider the various domains of the “whole child.”

Provincial Example

Saskatchewan has amalgamated responsibility for child care, pre-Kindergarten, and Kindergarten under its Ministry of Education. School divisions operate the programs, enhanced by partnerships with child care and other service agencies. Four principles guide investments and decisions regarding local needs and priorities: quality; supporting optimal child development; universality, accessibility, broad availability and affordability; and inclusivity. The programs are child-centred, reflect family and community contexts, and encourage partnerships between parents and child care providers.

The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is a population-based measure of children's readiness to learn in Grade One. Teachers in junior or senior Kindergarten classrooms administer it to their students. It gathers information regarding areas of strength and deficit in groups of children and, consequently, tries to mobilize communities to respond at the preschool and elementary school levels. The composite findings can be used to adapt classroom activities to better address student needs. The tool measures school readiness as it relates to the following five domains: physical well-being; emotional health; social competence; language skills; and general knowledge and cognitive skills. Researchers compile results to identify concentrations of vulnerable children, determine contributing factors and make recommendations to improve outcomes. Children are deemed vulnerable if they are in the bottom 10th percentile in at least one of the five domains.

Assessment:

Educators agree that preschool assessments should distinguish children's preparedness for school from their ability to perform particular skills, like counting and distinguishing letters. Nevertheless, both the notion of testing young children and the tests themselves are contentious.

Early childhood is a fluid period of development where age differences of mere months can produce dramatically different assessment results. Although the

tests are designed to provide data for improvement and accountability there is growing apprehension among some researchers and educators that more importance is assigned to cognitive measures such as a child's ability to count to 20 and write their name than their ability to make friends and their comfort in a school environment.

The conflict shows up in provincial Kindergarten curricula. Ministry guidelines laud the importance of child-focused, play-based learning, yet there is also a trend to instruct teachers to complete defined academic exercises. Specific cognitive skills are, understandably, easier to assess and test than emotional and social skills. ■



The System: Investing in the 'nurseries' of the nation

Numerous Canadian reports have examined early childhood from the perspective of health promotion, economic innovation, life-long learning, women's equality, and crime and poverty prevention. They recommend a holistic public policy response, including adequate child benefits and the creation of accessible early childhood and family support services. Such measures, they conclude, can raise the health and literacy levels of the entire population and break the cycle of family and neighbourhood poverty.

Where parents have the means to purchase services and/or programs for their children, their children benefit in their readiness for

school. Problems emerge, however, when parents lack resources. It is this dilemma of how to provide vital programs and learning opportunities for all Canadian children that prompts the call for major changes to the Canadian system.

One option is a universally funded system of early childhood education, which would begin before Kindergarten (and would include Kindergarten). The debate is also raging in the United States, where it has become an issue in the 2008 presidential campaign. Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and John Edwards have both called for a universal program, arguing the long-term economic benefits of school readiness. There too, the discussions concern the tension between the 'whole child,' creative-classroom approach versus the didactic skills development drive.

Opponents of a universally funded system point to the high price of government involvement. The costs are considerable. Estimates for a European-style early learning and care program introduced in Canada could top more than \$10 billion annually. There are other questions, about the effectiveness of government-sponsored programs, as well as religious or ideological opposition to state interference in what some consider private

Exemplary Practice

Toronto First Duty (TFD) was designed to combine child care, Kindergarten and family supports into a single service, demonstrating the advantages of providing comprehensive, universal early childhood services. The program meets parents' needs for child care and their desire for a quality pre-school experience. The TFD model is based on the best knowledge of child care, family support and education. It addresses the needs of the whole child and does not treat problems in isolation. It respects the primary role of parents and other family members and promotes learning opportunities at home. It is funded by a coalition of government, education and social services.



Provincial Example

British Columbia has established *StrongStart BC*, a free, drop-in early learning program for preschool aged children accompanied by a parent or caregiver. Qualified early childhood educators lead learning activities, including stories, music and art to help children get ready for success in Kindergarten. Parents and caregivers attending *StrongStart BC* centres can participate in organized early learning activities and are provided with new ways to support their children's learning at home. The centres, which are located in public schools, are open at least three hours a day and five days a week.

family matters. In general, Canadians appear conflicted about the need to offer pre-Kindergarten programs or to support families so that one parent can stay at home during those early years.

No one is arguing against the crucial role that families have in preparing their children for school – and for life. The family, however, is not the sole beneficiary when children are well prepared. The concept of societal good has begun to shape a view of the socialization of children as a shared responsibility, in which governments lead to ensure children, communities and the country realize the benefits.

Citing limited public resources and the high returns of programs for disadvantaged children, policymakers often aim their efforts at vulnerable communities. The research suggests, however, that restricting programs to a defined population or neighbourhood misses the majority of children who need help. Findings from the NLSCY and the EDI suggest that children showing developmental challenges are more likely to be found in low income and single-parent families. In terms of actual numbers, however, more than 70 percent of vulnerable children live in two-parent, middle-class families.

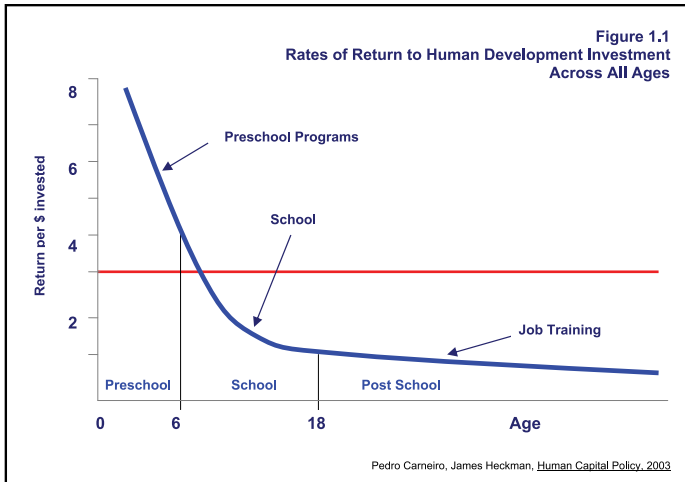
Backing for significant public investments in broad-based early childhood education comes from a range of stakeholders that includes established institutions such as the World Bank, as well as economists and behavioural and social scientists who have documented

early childhood as a critical period in human development.

Economist James Heckman won the Nobel Prize in 2002 for his demonstration of the life-cycle as a dynamic process, with each stage underpinning the next. His work shows that public spending in early childhood provides far greater returns on the investment than interventions at any other age. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, Heckman computes the return on investment in early childhood programs at 8:1, compared to a 3:1 return for primary and secondary education and 1:1 for adult training. Program benefits are most pronounced for disadvantaged children.

One striking example of a study whose findings support Heckman's is the *High/Scope Perry* Preschool Project. This study followed 123 African-American children who lived near the Perry Elementary School in Ypsilanti Michigan in the late 1960's into adulthood. Despite its small numbers, this study is significant given both its results and its evaluation. One group of children received a high-quality,





active learning preschool program, and the second group received no preschool program.

The participants were assessed annually from ages 3 -11, at 14-15, at 27 and at 40. The most recent results found that at age 40 the group that had the preschool program had higher earnings and higher percentages of home ownership, were more likely to have a job, had committed fewer crimes and had completed a higher level of schooling than those who did not have the preschool program. Earlier results also found that the preschool group showed significantly higher intellectual performance, school achievement,

and general literacy than the group that did not attend preschool. Over the lifetime of the participants, the return on investment to the public was an estimated \$12.90 for every dollar spent; a figure that increased as the participants got older.

In Canada, University of Toronto economists Gordon Cleveland and Michael Krashinsky estimate that a universal early childhood education program would provide payback at a 2:1 ratio. Other OECD countries earmark about 1 percent of GDP for early childhood programs – a figure Canada could shoot for.

Support for public spending on young children also comes from business. Thomas d’Aquino is President of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives. His 10-point plan to strengthen Canada’s economic base starts with families and communities: “If Canada is to succeed in forging a creative economy, we cannot afford to waste the talents of a single Canadian. In this context, Canada needs to reduce the financial burden of raising children and preparing them for productive lives as global citizens.” ■



“If Canada is to succeed in forging a creative economy; we cannot afford to waste the talents of a single Canadian. In this context, Canada needs to reduce the financial burden of raising children and preparing them for productive lives as global citizens.”
Thomas d’Aquino ,
President, Canadian Council of Chief Executives

The Canadian Playground

Canada was found to devote less than any of its counterparts to early childhood services - 0.25 percent of Gross Domestic Product, as opposed to the one percent of the GDP most OECD members spent, and the two percent that the top academic scorers allocated.

Government action has not kept pace with our growing understanding of the need for greater intervention to benefit young children and families. International comparisons reveal that Canada's support for families with young children is far below that of most of its competitors in the knowledge economy. As stated in the *Early Years 2* study, "Among developed countries Canada comes dead last in spending on early childhood programs."

Despite improvements in recent years, including an increase in programs available to children and their families, the funding system has resulted in a patchwork of services and programs for children and families, and for training of teachers and child care providers. The *Early Years 2* study describes the situation well. "There are more programs, but, outside Quebec, Canada's early childhood landscape remains highly fragmented and families face an ever expanding maze of unconnected options, diverse eligibility criteria, and payment requirements.

Funding remains a contested issue. A 2004 federal plan to inject \$1.2 billion annually into a national system of early childhood learning and care included agreements among the federal and provincial governments that kick-started planning and innovation in the provinces. When the federal government changed, in 2006, this plan was replaced with direct

payments to parents that included a \$100-a-month taxable payment as an alternative to publicly funded child care; a commitment to provide \$250 million for increased community and private child care spaces; and recommended increased parental leave.

Canada's record regarding support for young children and their families remains tarnished. Discrepancies among Canada and other countries are evident in several significant domains, including, among others, child poverty, support for parents and resources for early learning and care:

a) Poverty

Canada's child poverty rate of 15 percent earns it the rank of 19 out of 26 rich countries in a 2005 UNICEF study. Canada is eclipsed by countries with much smaller economies, including the Czech Republic, Greece, Bulgaria, Poland and Hungary. Statistics Canada's tracking of income and family types indicates that the mere presence of children is associated with falling assets. Median household income for young families declined almost 20 percent over the last two decades. The government's family support package is not even one-quarter of what is available in Austria and less than half the value paid to families in the United Kingdom and Australia.

b) Parental leave

Fifty weeks of paid leave for parents eligible for Employment Insurance compares favorably with the amount other affluent nations provide. Yet seven in ten women with infants under 12 months of age are in the paid workforce, suggesting that tight eligibility requirements and inadequate income replacement prevent many of them from remaining at home with their children.

c) Resources

When the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) sent a

team of experts to Canada in 2003 to evaluate early childhood programs, it noted a gap between Kindergarten and child care. Kindergarten, the experts observed, is a social responsibility, financed by government, with a defined pedagogy and adequately staffed and resourced. Conversely, child care is a market service, resulting in a patchwork of uncoordinated programs, under-financed and with few settings that contribute to children's school readiness.

Resources are not evenly distributed among communities, with access a particular barrier in rural and

remote areas and for urban Aboriginal and new immigrant families.

Even when spending for Kindergarten programs is included, Canada was found to devote less than any of its counterparts to early childhood services – 0.25 percent of Gross Domestic Product, as opposed to the one percent of GDP most OECD members spent, and the two percent that the top academic scorers allocated. ■

Provincial Example

Quebec's \$7-a-day child care covers 64 percent of children in the province and costs \$1.5 billion annually. Child outcome data are not yet available, but the program is proving to be cost-effective. Quebec's maternal workforce rate has gone from below the national average to above. Child poverty has declined and the tax revenue from the increase in labour force participation now covers 40 percent of the cost of the program. By 2010, labour force participation is expected to offset 50 percent of the costs.



Provincial Example

Ontario has established Early Years Centres in every provincial riding. The centres offer free programs and activities to children up to age six, and to their parents and caregivers. Parents and caregivers can get information about their children's development and about services to support that development. The centres provide programs on early learning and literacy, pregnancy and parenting, and help parents and caregivers in all aspects of early child development.

Let's Go! The importance of action

The need for programs for young children is an issue with stubborn sticking power, driven by the imperatives of working parents, as well as by Canada's educational and socio-economic interests. Coupled with recent developments in research and practice, these forces have created a critical mass of awareness that stretches beyond parents to encompass leaders in business, health, education, community planning, justice and the media.

In support of these developments, The Learning Partnership produced this report to facilitate discussion about key issues affecting young children's readiness for school and to increase public engagement in this issue. For TLP, school readiness is a critical measure of human development that warrants the concern of all Canadians. In light of the many benefits of school readiness, both for children and society at large, immediate, purposeful action on a number of fronts is needed.

Governments:

All levels of government should work together to create a national vision with coherent policies and appropriate financial commitments for a sustainable early learning system. Governments at all levels must identify early learning as a priority. New investments and infrastructure are necessary to improve access, program quality, educator training and public accountability in the area of early learning and care programs and services.

Government policies should consolidate the functions of Kindergarten and other early childhood services into integrated environments that are linked to schools throughout the country.

School boards / districts:

Early learning programs should be based on a play-based developmental approach that focuses on the 'whole child'.

It is necessary to establish a working relationship between school Kindergarten programs, early learning services and child care programs in order to facilitate supports needed for children and families and to avoid the current patchwork of services and programs.



Communities and service providers:

Transforming the current service patchwork into an early childhood system requires policy change but progress can be made community-by-community, and program-by-program. School boards and children's service agencies can collaborate on many fronts, including: communications with parents; staff development; common curriculum approaches, shared use of space and reducing transitions for children.

Parents:

Be informed: The internet swims in accessible information about early childhood development, much of it from Canadian sources.

Be involved: Parents' active interest in their children's learning promotes school success. Read books to and with your young children regularly. Read and act on the material sent home with your children. Be proactive in discussions with staff. Encourage your local school to become a centre for early childhood programming.

Be active: Parents can be active advocates for early learning in schools, communities and in communication with politicians and government decision-makers.

Everyone has a stake in how well children are prepared for life. Canadians need to have a more informed debate about the options available to support early learning for children and their families and about the costs and benefits of the various options. The debate can be supported

by information from this and other reports. The following are a few relevant sources of information about early childhood development and its link to school readiness:

The Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre of the Canadian Council on Learning disseminates the latest scientific knowledge on learning in young children to policymakers and the public.

<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/ccl>

The Council for Early Childhood Development produced the *Early Years Study 2* and supports governments, communities and individuals to develop comprehensive, early childhood programming.

www.councilccd.ca

The Childcare Resource and Research Unit compiles the latest information on early childhood research, policy development and media reports from Canada and around the world.

www.childcarecanada.org

Canadians:

Effective strategies to support children's early learning are costly and multi-faceted. Yet other countries have taken steps to support the early development of children and are reaping the rewards of reduced family poverty, healthier communities and enhanced productivity. It is time for Canada to take the initiative on early learning to ensure that all of our children are ready for school and their future success. ■

Action Steps

- Canada needs a national vision for a sustainable early learning system.
- New investments are needed to improve early learning and care programs.
- Early learning programs should be play-based, focusing on the whole child.
- Programs and services for young children should be integrated to avoid the current patchwork approach.
- Parents should be involved, informed and active with respect to their young children's development and learning.
- Canadians need to discuss the options for the best system to support early learning.

Who We Are

The Learning Partnership is a national organization with a mission to champion a strong public education system. We pursue this goal by conducting research and developing policy alternatives, by introducing innovative programs that help children to learn, and by initiating varied avenues for dialogue with government, educators, business and the community about publicly funded education.

We want to hear from you

The Learning Partnership seeks to engage Canadians in a wide-ranging discussion about educational values, goals and strategies to ensure that our children have the best public education possible. We therefore want to know what people think about the issues raised in this *Progress Report*. To contact us please see below:

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Primary Reference

Doherty, G. 2007, 'Conception to age six: The foundation of school readiness', *The Learning Partnership*, Toronto

To download the background research paper and to access additional resources and sources for this *Progress Report*, please go to the Policy and Research section of The Learning Partnership website www.thelearningpartnership.ca.