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ABSTRACT

Arguing that quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) contributes to meeting goals that strengthen Canadians and Canadian society, this paper discusses the support found for ECEC within the nation; maintains that ECEC is a broad issue that bridges socioeconomic, ethnic, and regional divisions; and addresses the main problems and issues in developing a national system of ECEC in Canada. The paper begins with a discussion of the support for ECEC by diverse sectors of public policy and of the public at large: This section notes that the main problem is the absence of a coherent, well-developed national approach to ECEC. At the program delivery level, accessibility and quality are described as problematic. The paper then presents a long-term vision for quality ECEC nationwide and delineates guiding principles for program development. Suggestions are offered regarding the roles and responsibilities of the federal and provincial governments and for policy development, community involvement, planning, reporting on progress, knowledge sharing and research, and financing. A 4-year plan is presented involving: (1) articulation of the intention and the long-term goal of universally accessible high-quality ECEC to be developed within 10 to 15 years; (2) establishment of a Directorate for ECEC within the federal government; and (3) a fiscal commitment of new dollars that considers an initial policy development and planning period and provincial/territorial capabilities to use federal funds. The paper concludes by asserting that a renewed and reoriented federal strategy for a well-crafted national ECEC system addressing the needs and aspirations of all families must be at the heart of a renewed social policy mission for Canada in the twenty-first century. (KB)

Early childhood education and care: An issue for all Canadians

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It's time to act

Ottawa

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AN ISSUE FOR ALL CANADIANS: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Why is early childhood education and care important for Canada?

Today the term “early learning and care” or “early childhood education and care” (ECEC) has largely replaced “day care” or “child care”. The term ECEC is used to signify much more than looking after children while a mother is employed. ECEC services are assumed to provide early childhood education, child care and parent support through integrated, multi-functional services that fulfill all these functions simultaneously.

Early childhood education and care is very important for Canada because it contributes to meeting four main goals that strengthen Canadians and Canadian society. If they are well designed, ECEC programs simultaneously:

- Serve as the foundation for life-long learning and the human capital component of innovation through healthy child development;
- Support parents, especially mothers, in employment, in training, education and their own life-long learning;
- Foster social integration, social solidarity and social cohesion, for example for newcomers to Canada;
- Provide equity for diverse groups in society, particularly Aboriginal people, children with disabilities and women.

ECEC is widely supported by diverse sectors and the public

ECEC is well supported by a wide variety of groups with various interests and by the public at large. The idea of multifunctional ECEC programs has been popularized by reports such as the Mustard-McCain *Early Years' Report* and exemplified by the perspective of *Starting Strong*, the summary report of the OECD's Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care. In addition, a mountain of social, education and economic reports support ECEC from a variety of perspectives. It is noteworthy that – for the first time – all three candidates for the federal Liberal leadership have made ECEC part of their campaigns, using language like “universal access” and “a right” (Manley), “comprehensive national standards” (Copps) and “child care is important but child care divorced from the capacity of teaching and learning at a very early age... really does mean there's a whole generation that's going to fall behind” (Martin).

Because it can play multiple roles, early childhood education and care features in multiple agendas - education, social development, equity, health (as a social determinant), anti-poverty, the urban agenda (particularly building social cohesion at the community level), immigration and social justice.

Internationally, ECEC is a mainstream policy area in which Canada has very much fallen behind. Universal ECEC is already very well developed in continental European countries where almost all children from sometime between the second and third birthdays (or even younger) attend publicly funded full-school day programs. Countries as diverse as the U.K., Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Jamaica are now beginning to put these in place as well. Even in the United States, publicly funded early childhood education programs are accessible to many more three-year-olds than is

the case in Canada. A 2002 EU agreement sets high accessibility goals for child care both for older preschoolers and for infants and toddlers as a key element in meeting long-term economic and social goals for all member nations.

Public opinion polls suggest strong public support. A 2003 poll¹ found that 90% of Canadians agreed that “Canada should have a nationally co-ordinated child care plan” and 86% agreed that “there should be a publicly funded child care system that makes quality child care available to all Canadian children.” This is fairly consistent with but higher than previous public opinion polls; it would seem that the trend is toward very high public support for ECEC.

Quebec’s universal ECEC program was termed the PQ’s most popular initiative. Ironically, one of the major criticisms of the program was that expansion (which was considerable since 1997) was not been able to keep pace with the high demand. Since the April 2003 election of a Liberal government in Quebec, the future of the universal \$5 a day child care program is in question².

The March 2003 Multilateral Agreement on Early Learning and Care was supported by all provinces/territories³. It was framed by HRDC Minister Jane Stewart and her p/t counterparts as “the first step to a national child care program”. While the initial federal funding is limited, the agreement was nevertheless well received by community and social development groups.

ECEC is a broad issue that bridges socio-economic, ethnic and regional divides

Middle class, poor and affluent families as well as immigrants/refugees, Aboriginal people and rural parents in every region of Canada all express desire for high quality ECEC so their children get “the best possible start in life”. “A best start in life” encompasses ideas about school readiness, social development and quality of life/well being.

A majority of young Canadian families in all regions, economic, ethnic and linguistic groups have both parents in the paid labour force or training or education. The labour force participation of mothers of young children is higher in Canada than in many other countries and has been steadily increasing - from 68% in 1995 to 73.4% in 2001 (with youngest child 3-5). The high labour force participation rate for mothers is consistent across Canada’s regions and among all kinds of families - especially middle class and newcomer families. In addition to employment, many women require child care to take training or participate in education (life-long learning). In this regard, the United Nations identified the absence of Canadian progress on child care in its recent criticism of our compliance with the Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

¹ Public opinion poll conducted by Millward Brown Goldfarb for the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada and the Canadian Child Care Federation (January, 2003).

² See, for example, Premier Charest’s June 4, 2003 inaugural speech at the Quebec National Assembly.

³ Except Quebec, which had begun putting its own ECEC program in place in 1997.

What are the problems/issues?

Perhaps the main problem is the absence of a coherent, well-developed national approach to ECEC. Policy research by both the OECD and the EU have identified policy and program coherence as key in successful approaches to ECEC. The EU has described this well:

“There can be, and should be, diversity in the types of services that are available to families. Services can and should respond to a wide range of needs. But this diversity, flexibility and multi-functionality should operate within a framework that ensures a coherent approach across services for young children in a number of key areas: administrative responsibility, legislation, cost to parents, access, staffing including training and employment conditions, parental involvement, reliable care, quality control. These areas, if taken together and if adequate standards are set, will provide a guarantee of quality” (1996: 8)

In Canada, while the 2003 intergovernmental (Multilateral) Agreement on child care has begun to establish the shape of a national strategy, there are no national goals, objectives, targets and timetables or implementation plans. The component parts of ECEC - education (kindergarten) and child care - are within provincial/territorial jurisdiction. However, provincial /territorial programs are neither coherent nor well developed (with the possible exception of Quebec’s evolving program).

In the few areas where the federal government has assumed some responsibility for ECEC (such as Aboriginal people and immigrants), the approaches are not coherent, integrated or well developed. The absence of coherent public policy has negative implications for parents and for children and also means that public resources are not used effectively or prudently.

At the program delivery level, the issues fall into two main categories: accessibility and quality

Accessibility

Accessibility is composed of three sub-issues - supply, affordability and suitability (suitability means that, for example, for a parent in the labour force full-time, a part-day program such as morning kindergarten is not suitable because it is not sensitive to the parents’ labour force needs).

Currently, in Canada there is a regulated child care space for 12% of children aged 0-12 (or approximately 15% of children aged 0-6) (this includes centres, nursery schools and regulated family child care). Provincial/territorial figures range from 4.2% (SK) to 21.1% (QC)⁴. At the same time, the user pay system in place in all provinces but Quebec means that many modest, middle income and poor families are barred because they cannot pay the costs. In comparison, in continental Europe, virtually all children attend publicly funded early childhood education and care services beginning at age 2-3 years; in a number of countries, these services are largely free.

Quality

There are a number of regional studies and one national Canadian study that show that the quality of regulated child care programs is quite variable by, and within, regions but that overall, program quality is generally too mediocre to be termed “developmental” or educational.

Abundant research shows that the quality of ECEC programs is key in determining whether it is developmentally beneficial or even potentially harmful. That is, if the program is poor quality, it

⁴ Friendly, M., Beach, J. and Turiano, M. (2002). *Early childhood education and care in Canada 2001*. Childcare Resource and Research Unit, University of Toronto.

does not provide early childhood education or “a best start in life”. Here it should be noted that the large majority of Canadian children whose mother is in the paid labour force are in unregulated care arrangements such as unregulated family child care, “babysitter” or “nanny” care. While these are of unknown quality, it is generally agreed that they do not provide developmental early childhood education. Indeed, many working parents using such “care” arrangements also send their children to early childhood education programs such as nursery school if they can afford to. While this may provide the developmental experience parents are seeking, it does not provide the consistency and stability that is also part of a high quality ECEC experience. At the same time, making and sustaining piecemeal ECEC arrangements is often a source of stress for parents.

Knowledge about the components of high quality in ECEC programs (such as teacher training, consistency and turnover) is underpinned by considerable research; the features that contribute to high quality in ECEC are well understood.

Policy issues linked to accessibility and quality

At the policy level, research shows that a number of characteristics are linked to quality and accessibility. These include regulation, auspice (or whether the program is operated for-profit or not-for-profit), policy and program coherence, and financing.

What would a fully mature ECEC strategy look like? A long-term vision

It is generally agreed that development of universal high quality ECEC would be an incremental 10 or 15 year process. That this is necessary in order to develop policy, staffing and programs well has been the experience in jurisdictions such as Quebec, Sweden and other European countries, and is relatively well accepted by groups in the community.

At the program level, a fully mature ECEC strategy would mean that:

- A system (or comparable provincial/territorial systems) of ECEC services would be complemented by family policy such as paid maternity/parental leave and family-friendly employment policy;
- All families would be able use ECEC programs in their community if they so chose;
- The programs would be multifunctional - they would be open both to families with a parent at home (who might send their children for a shorter day) and those with parents in the labour force or learning situations;
- Parents would be able to choose among high quality centre-based or family-based services that would be non-compulsory and available on a full-day or part-day basis (“nursery school”) as the parent chooses. Within reason, flexible hours services would be available as well;
- ECEC programs would be part of a sustained, well-resourced, publicly funded system. There would probably be affordable parent fees;
- The ECEC programs would be high quality, staffed by qualified decently-paid early childhood educators and educational in the non-didactic, play-based sense (they would be great places for children to be);

- Programs would be responsive to parents and the community at the local level;
- ECEC systems in the different provinces/territories may adopt somewhat different models but would, at the same time, share common pan-Canadian principles (this would be similar to the Medicare concept);
- Consistent with Canadian values, programs would include families and children across the socio-economic spectrum, cultural diversity would be respected and celebrated, and children with disabilities would be fully included.

At a national policy level, guiding principles such as those from a 2002 report by the Social Policy Committee of the federal Liberal caucus would guide development. These principles recognize evidence (well summarized by the OECD) that ECEC services are most effective when they are high quality and available to all children; they are generally based on the best available knowledge about child development and best practices in public policy and service provision.

Guiding principles

- Universal provision of service that is inclusive of all children regardless of different abilities, economic, cultural, linguistic and regional circumstances or their parents' work status;
- Strategies to improve quality that include regulation, quality guidelines, sufficient numbers of trained and fairly remunerated teachers and child-friendly physical environments;
- Comprehensive service provision balancing the need of children for developmentally appropriate educational programs and the requirements of parents and employers for a range of care services including part-time, extended, seasonal and non-traditional hours of care;
- Responsiveness to community values and diversity and encouraging of community and parental input;
- Accountability for financial, administrative and service performance to governments and the community;
- Integrated multifunctional service provision that provides continuity for all parents and children, builds on existing programs (such as child care, kindergarten and nursery schools) and makes efficient use of public resources.
- Within these principles, a variety of models for provincial/territorial delivery of educational child care services is possible. Federal and provincial/territorial governments would work collaboratively to develop policy and program models that would ensure that, ultimately, Canadians in all regions would have access to ECEC services of reasonably comparable high quality.

Policy solutions

Roles and responsibilities

The main roles for the federal government would be vision, leadership on developing a long-term plan (with the provinces and territories and civil society) and policy framework, and providing financial support for the program.

The federal approach would clearly need to respect provincial jurisdiction as defined by SUFA. The “architecture” suggested by SUFA (and laid out by the Social Policy Committee of the Liberal Caucus report) would shape development of the strategy.

Provincial roles would include collaboration on national policy, development and management of programs and public accountability for service delivery and financial resources.

The recent Multilateral Agreement on child care with its initial conditions requiring that services be regulated and public reporting would be an asset upon which to build.

Public accountability, transparency and effective policy

Policy development. An effective program of high quality effective ECEC services requires a well-developed social policy framework. A good model for how Canadian ECEC policy could be developed could use elements found in the processes of the EU. The EU Childcare Network was set up by the Equal Opportunities Commission of the EU and served from 1986 to 1996. The Network, guided by EU Council of Ministers’ recommendations, consisted of both government and expert/NGO representatives from each Member State and made recommendations concerning quality, accessibility, financing, service models, staffing and reporting. The governance arrangements of the EU provide useful ideas for national policy development in Canada in areas within provincial jurisdiction.

Community involvement. Parents and families play the primary role in supporting and nurturing children. Communities and governments also make key contributions to the well being of children. Partnerships between these key players would ensure strong services that contribute to strong communities.

Planning. Implementation plans for an ECEC strategy would be based on agreed-upon goals and objectives. Plans would also include targets and timetables for working towards improvement in accessibility and quality.

Reporting. Public reporting on progress requires gathering national quantitative and qualitative data on the development and effectiveness of services including: accessibility, training and wage rates for the workforce; quality indicators; decrease in the number of lone parents on social assistance; and other outcomes for children, women and families.

Knowledge sharing and research. There would be substantial benefits to a plan for a long-term research agenda, knowledge development, data and evaluation related to ECEC, effective practices and child and family outcomes.

Financing. In order to ensure public accountability, federal funding would be directed only to public and community-based not-for-profit ECEC services. Substantial public financing for ECEC services is necessary if they are to be accessible to a range of families in an equitable way and high quality. A 1996 recommendation to the EU within the framework of the Council Recommendation on Child Care stated that within 10 years, public expenditure of “not less than

1% of GDP” should be dedicated to ECEC for children aged 5 years and younger. This is generally consistent with Canadian economic analysis of the full public cost of providing a mature system of universal publicly funded ECEC (with affordable parent fees) - about \$10 billion annually. It is assumed that in the development period leading up to the mature system, annual spending would have to be negotiated and profiled so as to allow provincial/territorial governments to “ramp up” their programs in accordance with their established development plans.

It should be noted that currently, public funding for ECEC includes:

- ▶ \$1.9 billion in annual provincial/territorial funding for regulated child care (2001) (58% of this is spent in Quebec);
 - ▶ \$1.5 billion annually (approximately - this is a rough estimate based on available provincial/territorial figures) for public kindergarten (provincial/territorial spending);
 - ▶ \$430 million (2001) for the federal Child Care Expense Deduction and Military Family Resource Centres;
 - ▶ \$167.9 million for federal Aboriginal ECEC programs (2001).
- ▶ ▶ TOTAL \$3.998 billion

In addition, there are a number of provincial payment schemes to parents (vouchers or other cash payments) that are used to help pay for child care.

Calculating the cost-benefits of ECEC. A Canadian 1998 cost-benefit analysis of ECEC found future social and economic benefits of \$2 for every dollar spent if the programs are both high quality enough to be developmentally positive and labour force sensitive so that mothers can be employed. The absence of child care is a key barrier to women leaving social assistance and the absence of child care is a key factor in women’s completion of literacy programs. In addition, participation in high quality ECEC is regarded as a key social determinant of health.

First steps

An initial four year plan within a longer term commitment on ECEC:

1. Articulation of the intention and the long term goal of universally accessible high quality early childhood education and care to be developed across Canada within 10 or 15 years;
2. Establishment of a Directorate for Early Childhood Education and Care within the federal government (HRDC). The Directorate’s responsibilities would include:
 - working in collaboration with p/ts and community experts to develop overarching national principles and guidelines for ECEC (building on the principles set out in the Multilateral Agreement on Child Care, 2003);
 - spearheading the policy process in collaboration with provincial/territorial responsables and community experts. The policy process would include working with each p/t to establish a plan for moving toward blended, high quality, accessible ECEC programs tailored to p/t strengths and weaknesses and specific needs;

- defining roles and responsibilities for stakeholders (federal government - vision, leadership, funding and expertise; p/ts - regulatory systems, public accountability, establishing program models and developing policy, planning and service delivery
- within national framework and principles; local community level - developing and managing services and setting priorities within p/t models;
- facilitating intergovernmental work on policy, best practices with provinces and territories;
- in collaboration with p/ts, setting targets and timetables for improving accessibility and quality;
- ensuring that data, research and evaluation are in place;
- ensuring accountability for effective use of public resources.

3. Setting out a four-year fiscal commitment of new dollars (above and beyond the 5 year 2003 budget allocation and current federal/provincial territorial expenditures) that takes account of an initial policy development and planning period and p/t capabilities to use federal funds.

Year 1 - \$250 million

Year 2 - \$500 million

Year 3 - \$1 billion

Year 4 - \$2 billion

Following evaluation of the four-year process, plans for subsequent years would be determined based on future needs and accomplishments over the four years.

In conclusion...

A renewed and reoriented federal strategy for a well-crafted national system of ECEC must be at the heart of a renewed social policy mission for Canada in the 21st Century. In modern societies, as in modern industry, the design phase is crucial, and this is so with an ECEC program. This means that getting key elements - such as the goals and objectives, who the program is for and how programs are delivered - right at the beginning is important.

A national child care strategy cannot be targeted only to poor and at-risk children. Such a strategy must ultimately address the needs and aspirations of all families including middle class families who form the majority of the Canadian population. As with the public school system and the public health care system, middle class Canadians will be the greatest number of beneficiaries and will be active supporters, critics, and stakeholders of the ECEC system. And as with public education and health care, the children of the working poor, the unemployed, new immigrants, children with disabilities, and Aboriginal children will fully benefit as well. Only by mixing with other children rather than being ghettoized or marginalized can disadvantaged children or those at risk share the aspirations and opportunities of all Canadian children.

A national child care strategy is a strategy of social cohesion both for the neighbourhood and the nation. For Canada, an ECEC strategy is a moral statement about how we see ourselves, our fellow citizens, and our country - a statement about social justice. In the neighbourhood, a child care centre can serve as a focal point for bringing the parents of young children together whatever their social or economic condition, or country of origin, united by a common dedication to their children and a desire to share experiences and support each other. And, like public schools, ECEC centres designed as community institutions in their own right can also serve as a hub for a variety of support services for parents. Thus, early childhood education and care can play a key role in creating the inclusive neighbourhoods, communities and the society we want.

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