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The pending Throne Speech and federal budget will be shaped by the pandemic. COVID-19 has exposed the depths of inequity in our communities, which is why Ottawa should reject “getting back to normal” and invest to grow, not just sustain, economic competitiveness and living standards.

One of the most effective areas to spend is early childhood education and care. As we document in [Early Years Study 4](#), it checks all the boxes by supporting parents to work, as a job creator for educators, a stimulus for local economic development, a money saver when it comes to reduced need for social welfare programs and a tax generator thanks to working parents. All this is just what is accomplished on day one. Over the longer term, children who receive a quality early education have an advantage in school, in the workforce and in life.

These outcomes are not accomplished the ‘normal’ way, by funding more child care spaces. The federal government has an electorate that is ready to go big for ECE, and provincial and territorial partners who are onside. Opening more child care spaces, as half empty centres attest, won’t induce parents to enrol their children while others shut down due to rising COVID cases. More child care spaces won’t entice educators into under resourced classrooms for low pay.

A federal response can address parent and educator reluctance by supporting provinces and territories to develop strong systems for planning, management, and oversight to stabilize the early education and child care sectors and support the ongoing development and delivery of quality services. Transfers need to be predicated on jurisdictions meeting three key outcomes: improving the quality of care, which is dependent on a qualified and supported workforce and reframing early childhood education as an entitlement for children, not just someplace to go while mom and dad work. Finally, to help family finances recover from COVID’s economic beating, child care must be affordable.

As a footnote, there is much chatter about the need for a federal secretariat to advise cabinet on policy design, accountability and interjurisdictional communications. This file is too important to be passed off on an arms-length, non-elected body. Leadership for building an effective early childhood system rests with government. As with health and other vital files, ECE needs a formalized federal/provincial/territorial ministerial table responsible for meeting outcomes. An expert secretariat can support but not replace elected oversight.

Regards,

Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain