



January 28, 2021

## **How to Move Forward with Early Learning and Child Care in Canada**

As a supporter of ECE, you may recall that in the fall of 2020, the Government of Canada announced its intention to collaborate with provincial and territorial governments to establish an early learning and child care system and expand before-and after-school programs across Canada. With the government now considering next steps, we believe now is the time to move from the status quo of the market delivery of child care as a private responsibility to early learning and child care as a public good.

The short- and long-term benefits of public investment in early learning and child care are well-documented. Children with access to quality early childhood programs are better prepared for the demands of formal education and the workforce. The availability of early learning and child care is also highly correlated with parents', particularly mothers', workforce participation. The pandemic has dramatically reduced mothers' workforce participation demonstrating the essential contribution of public education and licensed child care to our social infrastructure. In November 2020, Statistics Canada reported that 41,000 fewer single parents of children under 6 were employed - 25% fewer than a year earlier. Nearly 30,000 of those are single mothers. Canada needs public policy that views early learning and child care as early childhood education organized to support parents' work.

**Substantial progress can be made over the next five-years if the Government of Canada commits to funding, equitable access, quality requirements, and a robust public infrastructure.** The federal government currently contributes \$ 2.4 billion annually to early learning and child care programs while provinces and territories invest about \$12.1 billion annually. If the federal government increased its contribution by \$2 billion annually for the next five years, it would be possible for provinces and territories to improve compensation and working conditions to attract and retain qualified educators. The additional public funding would also increase enrollment in early learning and child care programs from the current rate of 50% of preschool children to 70% - the average enrolment in countries that are Canada's economic competitors. To learn more about what Canada can do to build a high quality, universal and publicly funded early learning and child care system, click here [earlyyearsstudy.ca](http://earlyyearsstudy.ca).

### **Making the case**

Our Early Years Study 4 envisions a system that offers a continuum of learning that extends from early learning and child care into elementary and secondary schooling. The essential framework includes a qualified early childhood workforce, universal access, public funding and a supportive public infrastructure.

## 1. Qualified Early Childhood Workforce

The social and economic benefits of early learning and child care programs are inextricably linked to program quality. Quality early learning and child care leads to academic benefits including increased readiness for school learning; increased social and emotional well-being; and, increased high school and postsecondary education. Enrollment rates in child care often, and for good reason depend on program quality – as parents consider their child care options, they are highly sensitive to program quality and unwilling to risk their children’s safety to mediocre care.

A qualified, professional early childhood workforce is an essential ingredient for quality early learning and child care. Adequate compensation, a supportive work environment and professional learning opportunities attract qualified educators and encourage them to pursue a long-term career.

## 2. Universal Access

Universal access means all children have the option to participate in early learning and child care based on their age, not their parents’ work status or income level.

Evidence shows that disadvantaged children benefit most when they participate with children from a mix of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds rather than in targeted programs. Universal access to early learning and child care equalizes learning opportunities for all children, due partly to peer effects on learning. The overall quality is typically higher in a universal program and the public is more responsive to supporting quality and funding for ECE programs that are available to all children.

A universal approach to early childhood education also addresses the enrollment problem of targeted programs. Families may choose not to participate in programs targeted to lower-income families to avoid perceived stigma or because they fear negative peer effects. A universal approach removes the stigma, while lowering barriers to participation and easing the integration of children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. When a child’s age is the only criterion for entry, it is easy to identify eligible children and the cost of outreach and screening for eligibility is minor. Put simply – universal programs reach a much larger portion of the disadvantaged population.

## 3. Public Funding

Quality, universal ECE programs require more direct government funding, which may be supplemented with parent fees that are affordable for middle- and higher-income families. Directing dollars to parents through tax benefits or deductions is the wrong approach as it fuels private delivery and dilutes quality. It also does not expand access or increase child care availability in Quebec or Ontario. Programs need the stability of secure, sufficient and predictable government funding to plan, recruit and retain staff and respond to changing community needs.

## 4. Public infrastructure

A quality, universal and publicly-funded early learning and child care system requires public infrastructure to provide accountability for public funds and ensure equitable access for all children. Public infrastructure is also needed for research and monitoring, system assessment and continuous quality improvements, safe facilities suitable for young children’s optimal well-being and learning and links to auxiliary professionals to support children with unique needs and families in distress.

Early learning and child care should be viewed as an extension of public education. In most provinces and territories, ECE is located within education departments or ministries to facilitate the continuum of learning from early childhood and beyond. Each jurisdiction can choose how it will deliver and manage an expanding early learning and child care system that meets the needs of each unique province.

Getting Started: A Five Year Plan for Early Learning and Child Care 2021 to 2026

We know that a high quality, universal, publicly funded and supported early learning and child care system is a long-term commitment to Canada's future. ECE ensures we have the social infrastructure essential for navigating the economic, environmental and social challenges resulting from the pandemic.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Margaret Norrie McCain". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored background.

Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain