



October 4, 2021

Getting Down to the Details of Early Learning and Child Care

Back in the late 1990s I, along with the late Dr. Fraser Mustard, was asked by then Premier Mike Harris to write a report on the future of childcare. The [Premier wasn't a fan](#). His government had tried several times with some success to redirect funding from licensed childcare centres to direct stipends for parents.

Our resulting report, the [Early Years Study: Reversing the Real Brain Drain](#) probably wasn't what Mr. Harris had in mind. In it we argued that [the brain drain](#) wasn't the exodus of skilled workers to the United States. Rather it was the squandered potential of little minds, denied the stimulating experiences that would set their owners up for school and for life.

Fraser and I proposed a rethink. Instead of childcare as a support designed primarily for parents to work, we outlined a plan for early childhood education. It would be the first tier of universal, publicly-funded education as important as the elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels that follow.

In the intervening two decades I co-authored [three more Early Years Studies](#), each building on the burgeoning science of the importance of quality early education to children's learning, health and behaviour. They've had some impact, cited in government statements including those ushering in [full day kindergarten in Ontario](#), [universal preschool in Nova Scotia](#), and most recently in [Canada's Budget 2021](#) and its \$30 billion fund to kick start a pan-Canadian early learning and childcare system.

Within weeks of the Budget's passing, there were eight signed federal-provincial-territorial agreements. An intervening election presented Canadians with two very different childcare options. Both promised affordability for parents but in addition [the Liberal plan](#) proposed doubling childcare enrolment and offered better training and pay for educators. The Conservatives wanted to cancel the existing deals in exchange for a tax rebate to low income parents as reimbursement for the fees they pay. Voters ultimately rejected the Conservative offer and embraced a once in a generation opportunity to create an early learning system for children and their families from coast to coast to coast.

Now the hard work of making it a reality begins. Those jurisdictions that didn't negotiate a deal prior to the elections must be made to meet the same exacting standards as those that did. These standards draw on [extensive research conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(OECD\)](#). Its comparative review of early childhood systems among the world's leading economies found a clear association between child outcomes in early childhood services that were publicly planned, managed and largely taxpayer-funded as opposed to those that were market-based, stimulated by tax rebates or direct payments to parents.



Our research also showed that when parents, particularly mothers, are supported to work, inequities are reduced while economic outputs increase. This in turn boosts tax revenues and lowers social costs; essential elements to post-pandemic recovery and addressing looming priorities from climate change to health care.

These findings shouldn't surprise. Just as we don't fund the education of elementary or secondary school students with stipends or tax credits, such mechanisms are unsuited for our youngest learners. Nor is children's entitlement to schooling tied to their parents' earnings, workforce participation or other circumstances, a practice that must end for childcare.

Early years systems work best when children are the priority. The execution of the federal-provincial-territorial Early Learning and Child Care agreements begins. The money is important but details matter. Success will rely on ensuring quality, access and affordability happen in equal measure.

Regards,

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

Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain