

**Early Years Study 4 Newsletter #20**  
**February 22, 2022**

Two years ago, on February 20, the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation released Early Years Study 4: Thriving Kids, Thriving Society (McCain, 2020). We repeated our central message from Early Years Study 1 (McCain & Mustard, 1999) calling on federal, provincial and territorial governments to provide early childhood education for all children. We argued that early education should be a child's right - a first tier of education as essential as those that follow. We recommended the federal government increase its annual contribution to early learning and child care to bring us closer to access levels available in other rich countries.

Within weeks of the release of Early Years Study 4 the COVID-19 pandemic hit. We pulled back our efforts to promote the study as the world around us locked down. We assumed the focus on the pandemic would sideline all other social projects. Instead COVID-19 exposed our social gaps, particularly the fragility of early childhood programs and the adverse consequences for children, families, and the economy. The fall 2020 Speech from the Throne and the spring 2021 Federal budget introduced an unprecedented \$30 billion commitment from the federal government to kick start the creation of a Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care system.

In less than a year, 12 provinces and territories signed agreements with Ottawa. Hopefully Ontario, the sole holdout, will join shortly. Each agreement builds on their respective context while committing to common principles – quality, affordability, inclusion. As promised in Budget 2020, the federal government is now preparing an Early Learning and Child Care Act that will enshrine principles and funding support.

There will be many beneficiaries of this legislation. Assured funding to provinces and territories to expand early learning and care will reduce social demands, add to their tax base, and grow their economies. Employers will benefit from an increased and stable workforce as affordable care allows more parents to work. Those with the most to gain (or lose) are children. They are the prime users of early childhood programs, and the quality of their experiences matters.

By writing into law what will affect this generation and those that follow, imposes a profound obligation on us to consider those most impacted. An Early Learning and Child Care Act can be much more than a funding arrangement between different levels of government. It should entitle young children to a quality early education, regardless of their parents' work status, the community they come from, or their unique needs. It should prioritize those who have been most excluded. Early childhood educators' work environments are children's learning environments. Including provisions for an appropriately resourced and qualified workforce is an essential anchor for quality early learning.

We have in the Canada Health Act a model of legislation that balances intergovernmental relationships with guarantees to citizens. Following two years of pandemic-induced loss and discord, building a Canada-wide early learning and child care system can be a national healing project, turning our common suffering into hope for the future.



Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain