

**Early Years Study 4 Newsletter #23**  
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You may have noticed daycare centres recently popping up in strip malls and store fronts. The historic Canada wide early learning and child care plan is rolling out \$30-billion over the next 5 years to provide families with low-cost access to child care. Savvy business people, anticipating the uptick in parent demand as fees come down to their promised \$10 a day, are getting in place to receive the windfall.

The problem is child care is not an entrepreneurial opportunity, it is the first tier of life-long learning. Canada has a ready-to-go platform in publicly-funded education, with a school in every neighbourhood able to deliver early learning and care to our youngest learners. However, Ottawa policy makers are reluctant to spend in education; an area of exclusive provincial jurisdiction. Its funding can be used for strip-mall daycare, but not for the quality early learning schools can readily offer.

In an article in The Conversation Canada, [August 15, 2022](#), Kerry McCuaig at the Atkinson Centre, at the University of Toronto explains what is at stake if federal policy leaves schools standing on the sidelines while Canada builds its newest social program.



Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain

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## THE CONVERSATION

### Why doesn't Canada let schools provide child care?

Canada's policy-makers could take lessons from other countries who have streamlined early learning and child care within their schools.

Instead, they are putting up roadblocks, preventing provinces and territories from using federal child-care dollars to transform schools into one-stop centres for young children.

It's a timely issue as parents countdown to the first day of classes, while scheduling down-to-the-minute drop-offs and pickups between child care and school, and scrutinizing child-care wait lists, hoping to net one of the [coveted low-cost spaces](#). This all adds up to unnecessary stress for families that could easily be avoided.

## Early childhood education models

In [Medina Sidonia](#), the small Spanish town where I am spending the summer, festivities are gearing up for school's return.

Children, organized into their new class groups, parade through the streets into the main square to pick up their back-to-school kits. In the lead are achingly adorable toddlers about to enter their first year of *escuela infantil*.

School in Spain officially starts at age six, but it's normal for much younger children to participate.

Federal legislation, passed in 2006, established preschool as a publicly-funded extension of education, delivered without fees for families. Over [97 per cent of children between the ages of three and five attend](#), with efforts underway to [incorporate two-year-olds](#).

The school day for all ages begins at 8:30 in the morning, ends at 4:30 and includes that delightful Spanish tradition, the two-hour lunch. Children may stay and eat with their peers or join the family meal at home. For parents who need additional hours to accommodate their work, child care is provided on site.

Spain isn't an anomaly: [Education departments in 18 OECD countries deliver free preschool for children starting at three years old](#). Belgium starts kids earlier at [two-and-a-half](#). In most countries attendance is optional, but in 2019 the French government made [\*école maternelle\* compulsory](#) for children turning three, even though 97 percent of preschoolers already participated.

Free preschool guarantees an early learning experience for all children while accommodating the needs of working families with additional hours.

While European youngsters and their families anticipate schools' opening, in my home province of Ontario the government siphoned almost [\\$1 billion out of the education budget](#), while [municipalities struggle](#) to get operators to sign up for \$10-a-day child care.

## Uneven Canadian approaches

Ottawa's \$30-billion effort to create a Canada-wide early learning and child-care system is centred on [affordable parent fees and creating 275,000 new spaces](#).

Forging a coherent social program out of a disjointed mix of commercial, charitable, religious and nonprofit providers operating under [13 different provincial and territorial agreements](#) is no small task, made more complex by rules that exclude schools from receiving federal child-care dollars.

Education ministries recognizing the value of early learning to [later school success](#) have extended their mandates to include younger children. Alternately called [preschool education](#), [prekindergarten](#), [pre-primary](#), [junior kindergarten](#), [early childhood services](#) or [Just B4](#) depending on their location, schools in six provinces and two territories offer preschool to at least some four-year-olds. Saskatchewan and

Alberta include [three-year-olds](#) who are [at risk of learning delays](#).

Newfoundland was about to join until told federal child-care dollars could not be used in schools. Its plan to offer full-day junior kindergarten to all four-year-olds [was replaced by a contract with a child care provider](#) to deliver 30 classes.

Nearby [Nova Scotia scaled back its plans to have three-year-olds](#) join its pre-primary program.

### **Children with special needs affected**

In Ontario, where full-day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds and on-site child care have been the norm for almost a decade, child care operated by schools [does not qualify for federal funding to reduce parent fees](#). It's a decision that hits more than the budgets of affected families.

Unlike child care, school-delivered programs must accommodate children with special needs, and schools are among the few employers to offer [early childhood educators decent wages and working conditions](#).

### **Québec lessons**

Québec's early learning expansion plans are unconstrained by the [\\$6-billion share it received from Ottawa's child care fund](#). [The province's Education Act was amended in 2019](#), entitling all four-year-old children to [preschool education](#). Schools will have a place for every eligible child by 2023, and provide [subsidized before- and after-school child care hours](#) for those who need it.

Québec's 20 plus years' experience developing low-cost care has taught some lessons: a central learning is schools serve all kids. Child care only reaches some.

[Long wait lists for care](#) still confront Québec parents. Even if all the targets in the [child-care agreements](#) are realized by the end of their five-year terms, only 59 per cent of kids under six will have access.

Experience tells us the children left out will likely be those who could benefit most, youngsters [from low-income, racialized and new Canadian families](#).

### **Change federal policy**

Child care delivered by schools has many advantages. Schools are publicly owned, eliminating the need for costly land and facility acquisition. Operating and oversight mechanisms are already in place.

Consolidating learning and care for children of all ages in one neighbourhood location reduces its carbon footprint.

Parents are spared the hassle of multiple trips between school and child care. Additionally, [research finds publicly funded early childhood programs](#) delivered by schools score high in quality.

Yet federal policy prevents scaling up these settings. It's a bad rule that needs changing before we see more daycare centres springing up in strip malls and storefronts, rather than excited youngsters stepping over school thresholds onto their best futures.

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