

Broken pledges on Early Years: Report laments lack of action for children

by Vanessa Lu, Toronto Star, September 6, 2002.

Three years after promising to invest in the crucial early years of life, the Ontario government has failed to come up with a universal strategy to put all children first, says a new report following up on the landmark Early Years Study.

By targeting just the most obviously at-risk children into Early Years Centres, the government has missed the point that boosting learning and health among all preschool children will pay dividends for a generation to come, the study suggests.

The initial Early Years Study by Margaret McCain and Fraser Mustard, commissioned by the Mike Harris government, was received with much fanfare in 1999 and resulted in promises of expanded preschool learning programs, along with more money.

But in the hard-hitting follow-up report, obtained by The Star, McCain and Mustard point out that if the provincial government had put just the \$200 it rebated to Ontario taxpayers in 2000 into early childhood development programs, that money could have funded an expansion of programs for one year.

"Ontario has the opportunity to provide leadership in enabling communities to put in place early childhood development programs to improve human development for the future," says the report, *The Early Years Study Three Years Later*. "This investment is key for the future of our next generation."

The initial study said putting resources into the first six years of a child's life would pay off by leaps and bounds in later years, with a strong and vibrant province.

McCain, former New Brunswick lieutenant-governor, and Mustard, a physician, outlined the importance of brain development during the early years of life, which can give a child the basis for competence and coping skills in future years.

That means that if kids are given stimulation, good nutrition and age-appropriate toys, and are played with and read to regularly, it can help brain development and prepare them to learn once they enter school. Without positive nurturing and stimulation, children may have a tough time overcoming emotional, social and economic challenges later in life.

In their assessment of Ontario's performance in the past three years, McCain and Mustard criticize the government's decision to create the Early Years Centres, saying they do not adequately embrace the concepts set out in the report, including the idea that the program should be community-based, with a universal focus, and integrated with the school system and existing programs.

These resource centres - now in 40 communities, with plans to expand to 61 by next spring - have targeted at-risk families, generally low-income or special-needs kids, not all of Ontario's children, the report says.

It points out that the vast majority of the children up to age 6 - some 160,000 - who are considered at risk of not reaching their full potential live in two-parent, middle-income families. Programs need to focus on all children, not just those in poverty or with special needs, the report says.

Of Ontario's 900,000 preschool children, 212,000 are considered to be at risk and on a course that could lead to learning, behavioural and health problems later in life.

Society has changed, and children now often spend a large part of their early childhood outside their home, because parents are working.

McCain and Mustard have called for a provincial network of early childhood development and parenting centres available to all families with young children, and offering full-time or part-time non-parental care.

"We must face up to the cost of improving (early childhood development) initiatives, given our need to take steps to improve the quality of human capital in today's knowledge-based society," the report says.

It estimates that the cost of building an initial network based primarily in schools and community centres would be about \$3.15 billion, to cover all preschool children. Participation would be voluntary, so it would take about three to five years before that level would be reached.

The province currently spends about \$1.5 billion on preschool programs including kindergarten, which covers the federal government's contribution.

The report suggests some of those programs could fit into the network, and some costs would be covered through fees.

McCain and Mustard estimate that with tax credits and the right incentives for private-sector involvement, the shortfall would be only about \$350 million a year.

"This may seem like a large sum of money for a government focused on cutting taxes, but for governments that are vitally interested in the quality of human capital and the future of their society, it is a small sum of money for a wealthy society such as Ontario," the report says, noting that the \$200 tax rebate in 2000 could have covered the costs.

In addition, the report highlights the parenting and family literacy centres run by the Toronto District School Board for promoting a smooth transition to kindergarten.

Ironically, these centres are at risk of being axed by recently appointed board supervisor Paul Christie, who has the task of balancing the school board's budget.

The report also points out that initially the provincial government named Margaret Marland minister responsible for children, and even set up a staff and secretariat to implement the report. But in 2001, the children's ministry was moved into the ministry of community and social services.

That move, the report says, puts early childhood development programs at risk of being largely influenced by programs targeting at-risk families, and not focusing on the broader objectives of learning, behaviour and health for the population as a whole.