

Children Deserve Better

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Our children - all of our children - are our future. The more we invest in boosting their potential in the early years, the brighter that future will be.

That, in a nutshell, was the philosophy that shaped the landmark Early Years Study by Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain three years ago.

Former premier Mike Harris enthusiastically embraced their report. But in an update on government efforts to implement their ideas, the authors say Queen's Park has come up short.

What McCain and Mustard had advocated was a program to give every child under 6 stimulation, nutrition and toys that would foster brain development in the formative years, and thereby give all young children an edge that would assist them economically, emotionally and socially throughout the rest of their lives.

Instead, the government put up only enough money to create Early Years Centres in 40 communities targeted at children thought to be at risk - generally those from low-income families and those with special needs.

McCain and Fraser have an answer ready if the government decides to respond to their critique by insisting it simply didn't have sufficient funds to meet the needs of all young children in the province. As they pointed out, Queen's Park could have financed a universally focused program for an entire year with the money it spent sending taxpayers those ill-conceived \$200 tax rebates.

Think of how many kids lost a golden opportunity to grow up smarter just because Harris thought it more appropriate to give people a night out on the town.

Harris evidently lost interest in the project almost as fast as he embraced it. After naming Margaret Marland as minister responsible for children and giving her staff to implement the McCain-Mustard study, Harris turned around and collapsed the children's ministry into the ministry of community and social services.

It remains to be seen whether Premier Ernie Eves will heed this latest report which warns, "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."

Will Eves give our children the future they deserve?