

The Early Childhood Development Initiative: Challenges for the voluntary sector

by Marcel Lauzière

The announcement on September 11, 2000, made by the federal, provincial and territorial governments about the Early Childhood Development Initiative (ECDI) received mixed reviews from the CCSD and numerous other voluntary sector organizations, including members of the National Children's Alliance. On the one hand, the new funding was applauded because it represents a concrete recognition of the importance of investing in our children. On the other hand, the level of funding is clearly insufficient, and there is a lack of clarity about exactly how the funds will be spent and how governments will report back to Canadians.

In the October 1999 Speech from the Throne, the Liberal government committed itself to signing an agreement with the provinces around early childhood development, an important component of the broader children's agenda that the CCSD and many others have been promoting. The deadline was to be December 2000.

With this commitment in hand, the voluntary sector urged the federal government to announce funding in its February 2000 budget, in the hope that this would stimulate the provinces to come on-board. Unfortunately, the budget was silent. Instead, the issue of funding for early childhood development fell prey to the usual federal-provincial squabbles, with the federal government saying it was ready to move, and the provinces stating that children were indeed a priority, but that no agreement would be signed before federal transfer payments for health care were restored.

This impasse seemed insurmountable. Then suddenly, things began to shift and the federal government began making noises about the possibility of restoring transfers for health care. This culminated in the federal/provincial/territorial meeting in September and the signing of an agreement for restored transfer payments under the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST). This paved the way for an agreement on early childhood development* - the ECDI - a full two months before the December 2000 deadline!

While this announcement was cause to celebrate, a closer examination of the agreement tempered our enthusiasm somewhat.

First, the amount of funding is insufficient. The agreement announced \$2.2 billion over five years. While this may seem like a large sum, it falls far short of what had been hoped for. To put it in context, with Canada's 2.5 million children aged six or younger - the group targeted by the ECDI - this funding translates into just a little more than \$100 per child over the next five years.

Second, the agreement is vague on exactly how the funds will be used. All we know at this point is that the federal and provincial governments have agreed to invest in four areas: the new funding will be used to promote healthy pregnancy, birth and infancy; improve parenting and family supports; strengthen early childhood development, learning and care; and strengthen community supports.

While the CCSD recognizes that each province needs to tailor its programs and services to its own particular realities, there is no indication on how the provinces will identify those priorities and make choices. Moreover, the funds will flow to the provinces through the CHST, a block fund. This will make it very difficult for Canadians to monitor how the funds are being allocated.

In my view, there are several major challenges ahead for the voluntary sector. First, we need collectively to ensure that all provincial governments identify appropriate priorities for support. The agreement speaks about the need for effective mechanisms to allow Canadians to participate in the priority setting. Let's make sure this happens and that parents, organizations, and service providers working on behalf of children, those who know what the needs are, are central in this process.

The sector must also keep the governments' feet to the fire with regard to monitoring and tracking of results and outcomes. The bottom line is that five years from now we will want to know whether we have progressed as a country. The agreement talks about the premiers' commitment to develop comparable indicators and to report annually. The challenge for our sector will be to ensure that the

proper indicators are selected and developed so that we can effectively measure the outcomes of these investments. For this to happen, governments will need to work in close collaboration with the sector.

Third, on the issue of funding, pressure must be sustained. There is no doubt that the September announcement is a step in the right direction, but the funding needs to be strengthened in order to implement a truly comprehensive children's agenda for the 21st century. We cannot let the federal and provincial governments believe that the issue of children has now been fully addressed and that they can move on to something else. At the very least, the pressing needs of school-aged children and adolescents demand attention.

If we are to meet these challenges, the voluntary sector will need to collaborate like never before, because the environment has changed under the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA). In particular, there will need to be real and effective collaboration among organizations at the national, provincial and regional levels if our collective voice is to be heard.

In this instance, organizations under the umbrella of the National Children's Alliance and other coalitions need to ensure that the federal government continues to recognize investments in children as a priority. There is also an important role for national organizations to play in the development of comparable indicators across the country and in facilitating the sharing of experiences and best practices.

Provincial and regional organizations must also play important leadership roles by ensuring that their respective governments identify appropriate priorities and allocate funds accordingly, respect their commitments to track and report outcomes, and recognize the importance of increasing provincial investments in children.

The ECDI is an important breakthrough but it also represents major challenges for the voluntary sector. This will be a test of how well the sector can collaborate and achieve results. Let's make sure that children and families reap the full benefits of these new investments.

** While the Québec government is not a signatory to this accord, it has been playing a leadership role in terms of its investments in children.*

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