

Open letter to The Right Honourable Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada; Michael Ignatieff, Leader of The Opposition; and Jack Layton, Leader of the New Democratic Party ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

OPEN LETTER TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE STEPHEN HARPER,

PRIME MINISTER OF CANADA; MICHAEL IGNATIEFF, LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION; AND JACK LAYTON, LEADER OF THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY

December 15, 2008

Dear Mr. Harper, Mr. Ignatieff and Mr. Layton:

Last week UNICEF published a new study rating Canada's provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) at the very bottom of 25 developed countries. In this first international study to rank the quality, access, financing and policy of ECEC programs using measurable benchmarks pegged to the average level of OECD achievement, Canada achieved only one of ten minimum standards. Canada's dismal showing motivated UNICEF to call on the federal government to implement the 2007 recommendation of the Senate Committee on Human Rights to "take the lead in developing a coordinated approach to the establishment of measurable standards, guidelines and appropriate funding for child care, with solutions presented to the public by July 2009".

The signatories to this letter consider the impending January budget to be an important opportunity to include critical investment measures in support of working parents and the care of their young children. The short and long-term returns on such investment are significant and proven.

The two important parallel societal developments documented by UNICEF's report are common to all OECD countries including Canada. First, the shift to out-of-home child care as the norm in the world's richest countries has clearly occurred in Canada where 75% of mothers of children 3-5 years are now in the paid labour force. Second, Canadians have come to recognize the strong evidence about the critical importance of the early years of life. The report notes that convergence of these parallel developments carries great potential for societies both in the short and the long term if public policy ensures that early childhood programs are high quality, accessible and complemented by other public policy for families.

High quality accessible ECEC has huge potential to enhance children's well-being and development with significant long-term social and economic returns. But investing in child care is also a key strategy for responding to immediate economic challenges. Child care can promote economic stimulus through job creation, parents' labour force participation, higher government revenues from employment taxes, poverty reduction and lower social program costs producing economic returns exceeding dollars invested. But, as UNICEF notes, "under-investment limits the potential to ensure that the child care transition is good for our children": there is little value in services that fall below certain thresholds of quality and cost. Indeed, poor quality may be harmful for children. The importance of ensuring that child care is high quality as well as accessible cannot be emphasized enough.

We are calling on you to take immediate action to remedy Canada's dismal ECEC situation by:

- Earmarking multi-year federal transfer payments for ECEC capital and operating costs in the January 2009 budget. In addition to funds for operating costs, the expansion of ECEC facilities should be part of any infrastructure program designed to stimulate the economy;
- Coordinating the development of a robust national policy framework for ECEC in collaboration with provinces/territories and the participation of communities and policy experts, and consistent with roles and responsibilities inherent in Canadian federalism.

In the current economic situation many families are struggling to find and keep jobs, pay the rent and feed their children. While the economic downturn will be hitting hard at families across the spectrum, some will face particular challenges - newcomers to Canada, Aboriginal families, single parents and others who are already most likely to be disadvantaged. It is more important than ever that smart strategic governments invest in people.

The best available knowledge such as that assembled by UNICEF in their report tells us that public investment in young children through ECEC programs is one of the best investments governments can make. We are looking for investments in public financing and policy development to begin immediately and call on you - as Canada's government and Parliamentary leaders - to make this happen.

We stand ready to provide any support required to ensure that provisions for critical investments in early child education and care programs are included in the forthcoming budget.

Yours truly,

Cathy Crowe Social Activist, Street Nurse

Jody Dallaire, Chair, Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada

Marie Adèle Davis, Executive Director, Canadian Paediatric Society

Dr. John R. Evans, President Emeritus, University of Toronto

Nigel Fisher, CEO, UNICEF Canada

National Chief Phil Fontaine, Assembly of First Nations

Martha Friendly, Executive Director, Childcare Resource and Research Unit

Don Giesbrecht, President, Canadian Child Care Federation

Dr. Clyde Hertzman, Canada Research Chair, University of British Columbia, Director, Human Early Learning Partnership, President, Council for Early Child Development

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Michele Landsberg, Award winning author, Chair, Women's College Hospital

Dr. Donna S. Lero, Jarislowsky Chair in Families and Work, University of Guelph

Stephen Lewis, Professor in Global Health, McMaster University; Former Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF

Elizabeth May, Leader, Green Party of Canada

Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain, Co-author, The Early Years Study

Penny Milton, CEO, Canadian Education Association

Paul Moist, National President, Canadian Union of Public Employees

Emily Noble, President, Canadian Teachers' Federation

Hon. Roy J. Romanow, Former Premier of Saskatchewan, Chair, Canadian Index of Wellbeing Board

Laurel Rothman, National Director, Campaign 2000

Dr. Stuart Shankar, Chair, Milton & Ethel Harris Research Initiative

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Dr. Daniel Trefler, J. Douglas and Ruth Grant Canada Research Chair in Competitiveness and Prosperity, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto

Armine Yalnizyan, Senior Economist, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, First Fellow, Atkinson Foundation Award for Economic Justice

Related link: UNICEF Report Card ^[2]

Region: Canada ^[3]

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