

Canada cheating itself, its children ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Investing in early childhood education prepares children for the future and strengthens the economy, says Craig Alexander, a chief economist with the Conference Board of Canada.

"Canada is deeply under-investing in early childhood education," said Alexander while speaking at a luncheon in Kelowna on National Child Day.

In Canada, 58 per cent of children between the ages of two and four have access to early childhood education, compared to an average of about 70 per cent among other advanced countries.

"Canada should be striving to be at the top of the pack, and right now we're actually falling short of even the average," said Alexander.

The average early childhood education enrolment is slightly higher in B.C. than the rest of Canada at 61 per cent.

Alexander said he believes government needs to offer free early childhood education for all children in Canada ages three and four.

Until children reach the age of five and enter the public school system, parents are left to their own resources.

"Some kids have a very good experience - their parents can afford high-quality early childhood education, and that makes them more school-ready," said Alexander. "It gives them an advantage, whereas many kids from low-income backgrounds or disadvantages backgrounds don't have access to the same possibility to develop their skills. We should be thinking about early childhood education as a continuation of the public education system."

Children who take part in early childhood education programs benefit from stronger vocabulary, stronger numeracy skills and they are often better behaved when entering the public school system, said Alexander.

"We're not talking about kids sitting at desks or working through problems," he said. "It's often play-based learning, because that's how kids learn at early ages. If you go past a good quality early childhood facility, you're going to see a bunch of kids playing, but it's the activity they're doing that's actually giving them the benefit."

The cost of making early childhood education available for all four-year-olds in the country is about \$3 billion.

"When governments are making choices between investing in one area or another, they really should be thinking about investing more into early childhood education," said Alexander. "Our analysis would say for every dollar spent in early childhood education, governments get back \$6 in economic benefit."

Because of the high costs associated with such programs, Alexander recommends governments start with offering free education for four-year-olds, then later expand the program for three-year-olds.

"It's very clear that kids who go through two years of early childhood education get enormously larger benefits than kids (who) only go through one year," said Alexander.

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