

Needs of youth and children need more priority ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Concern is being expressed about children who may not be able to enjoy Halloween this year. Commentators note how much children and youth have already lost during this pandemic: a lot of fun has gone missing. Keeping Halloween is a start, but more is missing.

Needs of children and youth have not been a priority during COVID-19, and rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child have been ignored. For example, Article 2 says no child should be treated unfairly on any basis. COVID-19 has heightened issues of inequity. As The Spectator has exposed, the lowest income and BIPOC families have proportionately more COVID-19 infection than other groups. The recent UNICEF report places Canada 30 out of 38 most developed nations for its commitment to children, pointing to high poverty rates for Black and Indigenous children.

Article 23 gives the right to special education and care if you have a disability. There are often time sensitive windows for intervention, which COVID-19 school and child care closures have interrupted. Many special education students have not had the supports they need to make progress socially, emotionally, intellectually or physically.

Article 24 provides the right to the best health care possible. Access to mental health supports through the school system were curtailed by the closure of schools during COVID-19 at a time of anxiety and stress. Wait times for health care have increased and medical procedures have been delayed. McMaster Children's Hospital with The Children's Healthcare Coalition identified this September "more than 160,000 children and families who are desperately waiting for mental health treatment, hospital surgeries and procedures, child development and rehabilitation services, and pediatric home care services."

Article 27 gives the right to food, clothing, a safe place to live and to have your basic needs met. Before COVID-19 there were hungry children lacking basic necessities. During closures, children lost access to safe places, food and other school support programs including clothing and hygienic supplies.

Article 28 gives the right to a good quality education. Schools and early childhood education shut down for six months, and have reopened with restrictions. Quality early childhood education has been shown to particularly benefit children from low-income families by levelling the playing field with wealthier children. Before COVID 19, doing school-work at home had been identified by youth from low income families in "The Cost of the School Day" as difficult because of not having access to the internet, not owning a computer and lacking a quiet, safe, place to work. These issues increase with online learning. A Canadian study found in July 2020 that teachers reported that six per cent of all students had not engaged in online schooling at all. So it is disturbing that in some large cities low-income families are opting for online learning, although they may have fewer resources to support their children at home.

Children and youth have been short changed by COVID-19 and moving forward they should be a priority. So that child care and schools remain open, community transmission of infection needs to be kept low and public health units supported and enhanced. Kids require quality programming in the early years to thrive. This is not the time to lessen child care quality by reducing staff qualifications and increasing the size of children's groups, as Premier Doug Ford is suggesting in changes to the Childcare and Early Years Act. Let's recognize that children and youth have gaps in their education and training that require remediation. Let's plan locally and provincially so that we don't see drops in graduations from high schools in the future and a deprived generation. Let's use this coming period to bring greater equity to Black and Indigenous youth and a basic income program to combat poverty. Let's provide a National School Food program to combat hunger. Let's work to insure that additional public investment is provided to children's and education services so that this generation of children and youth can thrive.

Judith Bishop was a Hamilton trustee from 1988 to 2014, and five-time chair of the public school board.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: children's rights ^[4]
equity ^[5]

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/11/needs-youth-and-children-need-more-priority> [2] <https://www.thespec.com/opinion/contributors/2020/10/29/needs-of-youth-and-children-need-more-priority.html> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/childrens-rights> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/equity>