

Plant the seeds: Education youngsters could become literate, learn second language at junior kindergarten [CA-NB] ^[1]

Telegraph-Journal

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Source: Telegraph-Journal

Format: Article

Publication Date: 18 Apr 2008

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

A former New Brunswick lieutenant-governor warned the Liberal government it must immediately start establishing early childhood development centres to combat the province's devastatingly high illiteracy rate.

Margaret Norrie McCain, who served as lieutenant-governor between 1994 and 1997, said these high-quality centres would offer children optional learning environments that would stimulate their developing brains, which could boost literacy rates.

Once operating, these centres could also be a vehicle for second language education because language learning skills are the highest until age three. The former lieutenant governor said teaching second languages in these centres would be better than the "elitist" early French immersion program.

McCain told the special cabinet committee on early childhood development that the network of centres could be based out of schools to capitalize on the province's well developed kindergarten system.

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"We would be recommending that you build on that and start moving downward to four year olds. It would be full-day, we would call it junior kindergarten, extended day integrating care and learning so the child's day is seamless," McCain said.

Eventually the program could be offered to children as young as two. This system would be linked into the public health network, family resource programs, libraries, offering parents and children a wider array of programs.

The former lieutenant-governor said countries that invest heavily in early childhood initiatives score the highest when it comes to literacy. Even Cuba, a poor Caribbean island nation, surpasses Canada in human development indices because it is directing funds to young children.

The former Conservative government promised a pre-kindergarten system in 2005 but the concept was never developed.

Social Development Minister Mary Schryer said the province is setting aside \$5.7 million this year for early childhood development initiatives. Schryer said the cabinet committee will develop a long-term strategy for early childhood education and learning.

"We want that to start from the time the child is born to the time the child enters the school system and at the same time allowing children to have a seamless transition into the school system," Schryer said.

These early childhood centres would be used to drive up literacy levels but also second-language skills. McCain said studies show the best time to learn languages is in the first year of life and she said the existing system of immersion is "a case of bad policy embedded that was never evaluated as to whether or not it is good for our province and our country."

...

"But it should be for everybody. I believe now we have an elitist system which has hurt the 80 per cent of the children."

Low literacy rates may be costing Canada \$6 billion and former premier Frank McKenna told a national literacy conference this week in Saint John that raising our literacy rates by one per cent could boost national income by \$32 billion.

Literacy is a guiding force toward investment, but so is child care, according to Susan Prentice, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Manitoba. Prentice told the Liberal cabinet on Thursday that every \$1 invested in childcare generates \$1.58 worth of local economic activity, and each childcare job has an employment multiplier of 1.49.

"There is no doubt that childcare is infrastructure. That's because it lets other sectors of the economy flourish and for its job creation and economic affects in its own right," Prentice said.

- reprinted from the Telegraph- Journal

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