

It's time to act on child care [CA-NB]^[1]

Guest commentary

Author: McCain, Margaret Norrie

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EXCERPTS

To preface my comments, I would like to state that, in 1998, I co-chaired an early years study that was commissioned by the Ontario government.

The report released as a result of this groundbreaking study, has become the seminal document to support the case for creating an early child development system across Canada.

The emphasis in all the commentaries I have read coming out of New Brunswick has been on "child care" and it is true that this is how the plan has been presented by the federal and provincial governments.

I want to emphasize that this is about a lot more than child care - or babysitting - which will enable moms to go out to work.

It is about the economic prosperity of our country.

Today we have to acknowledge a two-fold reality: first, 70 per cent of Canadian children have two working parents (another 10 per cent a single working parent).

All these parents want high quality non-parental care for their children. This is not a slap in the face for "family values."

Women are in the work force for one of several reasons ranging from the need to keep the family above the poverty line to society's demands for their special skills.

The second reality is the recognition that, in a knowledge-based economy, the need for a highly competent future workforce is critical to national social and economic well-being.

That is why I want to stress that the child care debate, if you want to call it that, is about far more than "baby-sitting" or giving parents a choice.

It's about creating opportunities for a child to develop to his or her full potential and competency in a highly competitive world.

This is what the national child care plan is all about.

Those who have read the report know that the recommendations it offers are not about a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all plan. They stress that the system must take into account the needs and cultural mores of the community in which a child care centre is established.

I know that establishing high quality early child development in rural and remote regions of Canada presents some unique challenges. We are looking seriously at the hub and spoke model where those giving care to young children in their homes can do so under the training and supervision of a centre that has multiple resources.

I can already hear you saying, "What about the cost?" The simple answer is that we cannot afford not to establish a national child development system.

It is in everyone's best interests. Even if you are a senior who has raised your family or a stay-at-home mom who can afford to be with her children, you have to realize that the future of our country depends on producing knowledgeable, competent Canadians who are ready and able, because of what happened to them in the early years, to become tomorrow's leaders.

This is as important in rural New Brunswick as it is in downtown Vancouver. And, I can state unequivocally that the national child care policy is not a "made in Toronto" plan.

Over the past seven years I have travelled across Canada talking about early child care initiatives and I can tell you that providing high quality, affordable child care and play based learning is just as important to parents living on the Miramichi as it is to those who are raising children in a Toronto high rise.

I am sorry that the New Brunswick government is dragging its feet on this because, I firmly believe that unless the plan is implemented,

sometime down the road, people in the wonderful province I love so much will find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to surviving and thriving in our highly competitive world.

- reprinted from the Daily Gleaner

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