

Down under is on top in early childhood programs [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The new federal government has promised to introduce legislation to launch an early child care and development system in Canada. This is good news. Research consistently shows that early child care and development programs for young children result in higher levels of school readiness and better academic performance. The government's promise is also long overdue: Every jurisdiction in Canada except Quebec lags far behind most other developed countries in this area.

I recently studied New Zealand's experience with effective programs and policies in early childhood education and care. It has much to teach Canada. While the two countries differ in terms of size and population, both are parliamentary democracies with advanced social-welfare systems offering a similar range of early childhood education and care programs, and so meaningful comparisons are possible.

Far more New Zealand children (64 per cent) aged newborn to 4 have access to such programs than do Canadian children (12.1 per cent). Close to 100 per cent of all children in New Zealand today have participated in at least one kind of licensed early-childhood group program in their first five years of life. Aiming its sights even higher, the New Zealand government has recently announced its goal to provide free and universal ECEC programs to all children by 2007. Clearly, New Zealand parents have both greater access and more choice than do Canadians.

New Zealand also oversees the quality of its programs more coherently. It has adopted a strategic plan that spells out the goals and actions that are to be undertaken in a 10-year timeline by different stakeholders and levels of government. Canada has no such strategy to guide ECEC programs here.

ECEC teacher training is more extensive in New Zealand than in Canada. All New Zealand's early childhood teachers must complete three-year postsecondary training programs, most of them in the same colleges and faculties of education that prepare primary and secondary teachers.

In Canada, early childhood education teacher training requirements range from no formal training to, in a few cases, a one- or two-year training program in a community college. And while the New Zealand Education Review Office regularly assesses the program quality in all educational settings, including ECEC programs -- and makes those assessments public -- the only similar monitoring function in Canada is probably an initial licensing visit, and occasional follow-up visits, which focus primarily on health and safety.

New Zealand's Ministry of Education is responsible for all programs for children up to age 4. In New Zealand, early-childhood education is ranked as highly as all other educational programs.

By contrast, in Canada, federal, provincial and territorial ministries of education have little or no responsibility for delivering ECEC programs. Responsibility is instead spread across different government ministries. And tensions among federal and territorial/provincial levels of government over funding, services and accountability obstruct coherent planning.

New Zealand more generously funds ECEC programs than does Canada. While Ottawa has recently increased funding somewhat, as part of various agreements between the federal, provincial and territorial governments, Canada still invests far less than most other developed countries (less than 0.5 per cent of GDP) in early child development. Further, only a small portion of these federal funds is used for child-care operating costs; in some jurisdictions, expenditures on child-care services have actually declined.

The New Zealand government funds approximately 85 per cent of basic operating costs for early childhood care programs, with the balance made up through nominal parent fees and fundraising. Even more support is available through special incentive grants to programs that have raised quality. In Canada, the opposite is the case; parent fees typically cover 80 per cent of the costs of running child-care programs.

Canada's leaders should live up to their rhetoric and exert the political will and financial resources to create affordable, accessible and high quality child-care programs. Our children deserve no less.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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