

Early childhood development should be priority ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

You might not think early learning and child care is critically important for our economic future. But they are, because a successful Canadian economy will require highly competent workers with good learning and coping skills — and the trajectories for learning (and health) are set in the earliest years of life.

That is why James Heckman, a University of Chicago professor who won the Nobel prize in economics, has argued that the investments we make in the earliest years have the biggest payoff.

This is not just an economic challenge. It is also a social policy challenge. According to research by Fraser Mustard and his colleagues, youngsters attending Toronto schools in lower-income neighbourhoods average much lower achievement scores than schools in the more affluent neighbourhoods. So an important share of our population is starting off with poor preparation for a knowledge economy.

This is a challenge we cannot ignore. Knowledge or skilled workers will be in great demand as baby boomers begin to retire in significant numbers.

The Canadian Labour and Business Centre estimates 255,000 manufacturing workers could retire over the next 10-15 years. Some 11 per cent of the manufacturing workforce are 55 or older.

According to the recent Youth in Transition Survey by Statistics Canada, among Canadians age 22 in December, 2001, 21 per cent were post-secondary graduates and 24 per cent had no post-secondary education. Another 11 per cent had left post-secondary education without graduating while the remaining 44 per cent were enrolled in post-secondary courses, though that did not mean they would graduate.

A recent survey of Fortune 500 executives by the Conference Board of Canada found that while highly educated Canadians were found to be as high-quality as workers found anywhere, executives from multinationals considered many Canadian workers to be uncompetitive in their skills. This, the Conference Board report said, was one reason Canada was having a difficult time attracting new foreign direct investment.

In the knowledge economy, it is not helpful if 42 per cent of the 15-55 age group has the lowest literacy skills — the score registered for Canada at the end of the 1990s in the international literacy survey by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

In this election, Prime Minister Paul Martin has promised \$5 billion over five years to establish early learning and child-care programs.

Conservative leader Stephen Harper does not address this issue; instead, he is proposing a tax deduction for parents with children that will deliver the biggest benefits to those who need it the least, affluent parents, while doing nothing for families at the bottom of the income ladder.

NDP leader Jack Layton is promising stable funding for 200,000 children for child care but does not point to early learning as a key element.

The future of Canada — as a successful economy and an equitable society — depends on people.

Our single most important challenge is to ensure everyone has the opportunity to excel at their level of capability, and the most important place to start is with early childhood development.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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