

By failing children, we fail ourselves [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A mistake that both Mike Harris and Ernie Eves have made is to treat children as an expense rather than an investment. In doing so, they have put the future of Ontario's children, and hence Ontario itself, at risk.

One example has been their failure to deliver on a program of early childhood development and parenting centres across the province to prepare Ontario's children for learning when they enter school.

There is abundant scientific evidence that the trajectories for learning and health are set in the earliest years of life. This was well documented in *The Real Brain Drain*, the report by Margaret McCain and Fraser Mustard produced in 1999 for the Ontario government.

As a subsequent McCain-Mustard report released just recently, *The Early Years Study Three Years Later*, shows, the Tory government failed miserably in implementing the recommendations for community-based early childhood development and parenting centres.

To his credit, Ontario Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty has shown a better understanding of the importance of human development, which is why McCain recently endorsed his approach, declaring that she had given up on the Tories because of their failure to deliver on their promises.

As the recent McCain-Mustard report illustrates, this is not a poverty issue, though children living in disadvantaged families and neighbourhoods are at greater risk and their families need greater support. The vulnerability of children cuts across all income groups, hence the need for a universal approach.

Based on the work of Douglas Willms, a research fellow at the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research and Canada's leading expert on the performance of children, McCain and Mustard found that about 212,000 children or about 24 per cent of Ontario's 900,000 children in the 0-6 age group were "at risk of not reaching their full potential when they enter the school system and are on a life course trajectory that could lead to learning, behaviour and health problems in later life. The majority of these children live in two-parent, middle-income families."

The importance of early years development was well stated in a report this year from the Washington-based Committee for Economic Development, a research and policy group of 250 U.S. business executives and educators. The report *Pre-School for All: Investing In A Productive And Just Society* declared that "helping all children start school ready to learn is critical to their future success and to the well-being of society as a whole. Children who start school behind their peers are unlikely to catch up."

This has huge implications for children and their life chances. "Poorly educated workers are increasingly unable to earn a living wage in a global workplace where skills matter more than ever before," the report warned, calling for a U.S. national compact to make early education available to all children age 3 and over to ensure that they enter school ready to learn.

In fact, as McCain and Mustard stress, we need to start even earlier, since brain development occurs in the earliest years of life and is heavily influenced by the quality of parenting, the environment in which the infant is being raised, and the nature and level of nurturing and stimulative encouragement.

According to James Heckman of the University of Chicago, a winner of the Nobel Prize in economics in 2000, investing in the very young is the most economically efficient investment society can make.

"Learning starts in infancy, long before formal education begins, and continues throughout life," he says, adding that "recent research in psychology and cognition demonstrates how vitally important the early preschool years are for skill formation."

Moreover, he warns, "the later in life we attempt to repair early deficits, the costlier the remediation becomes."

Since early-years development is a challenge that cuts across all income groups, and since it is about learning and human development, responsibility for it should be taken from the Ministry of Family and Community Services, which botched what McCain and Mustard had originally recommended.

It should be moved into the Ministry of Education, or a new ministry of human development, as McCain and Mustard recommended, where

it more properly belongs.

The main reason for focusing on children is that society has a moral obligation to ensure their health and well-being. But from a more self-interested societal point of view, in a knowledge-based economy we need a highly skilled workforce that can contribute to our future growth and prosperity.

By failing to put children first, Queen's Park is undermining both the prospects for children and for Ontario.

-Reprinted from The Toronto Star.

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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