

Early education our best investment [CA]^[1]

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There's no better investment a society can make in the quality of its population and the ability of people to be innovative and productive - in other words, no better investment in the future of the country - than investing in the earliest years of children's lives.

Yet just because we know something is really important doesn't mean we will act. While federal and provincial politicians, and their senior bureaucrats, pay enormous lip service to the importance of early childhood development, their actions have been pitifully modest, reflecting a lack of vision, commitment and competence.

In September, 2000, the Prime Minister of Canada and the provincial premiers, with the exception of Quebec, agreed to join together to promote early childhood development so that, as their communiqué said, "to their fullest potential, children will be physically and emotionally healthy, safe and secure, ready to learn, and socially engaged and responsible." Quebec did not sign for political reasons but agreed with the importance of early childhood development.

For its part, the federal government agreed to provide, over five years, some \$2.2 billion to the provinces, including Quebec, to support investments in early childhood development programs and services.

The stage was set for Canada to make a real difference to the life chances of its children, and in the process achieve a true North American competitive advantage.

Yet since then hardly anything useful has been done.

The lack of leadership exists at both the federal and provincial levels. It's particularly disturbing in Ontario, where about 25 per cent of the province's 900,000 children could be considered at risk.

Ontario's failure to act is all the more surprising since former premier Mike Harris played an early leadership role by commissioning Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain to produce in 1999 a landmark report on early years development, "Reversing the Real Brain Drain". This report, and Harris' promotion of it, helped set the stage for the federal-provincial agreement the following year.

But Ontario failed to follow through on the Mustard-McCain recommendations. Harris appointed an incompetent minister, John Baird, to implement the report. Baird's lack of understanding was reinforced by similar incompetence in the senior ranks of the provincial bureaucracy. And Baird's successor, Brenda Elliott, has not indicated she has any grasp of the issue either.

Yet at a time when federal and provincial governments are focused on innovation and ways to raise our standard of living through improved productivity, they are ignoring the direct link between a highly skilled population and early years development.

They should read the work by James Heckman of the University of Chicago, which demonstrates the strategic importance of investment in early childhood education and parenting. It highlights the potentially enormous economic returns from investing in early childhood development. Heckman won the Nobel Prize for economics in 2000.

His arguments link directly to the federal government's innovation strategy, where it is recognized that the education and skills of Canadians will play a crucial role in improving Canada's capacity for innovation and hence a higher standard of living through improved productivity.

Looking at the U.S. situation, Heckman writes that "in the long run, significant improvements in the skill levels of American workers, especially workers not attending college, are unlikely without substantial improvements in the arrangements that foster early learning."

Indeed, "we cannot afford to postpone investing in children until they become adults, nor can we wait until they reach school age - a time when it may be too late to intervene. Learning is a dynamic process and is most effective when it begins at a young age and continues through adulthood."

While enriched early intervention programs don't significantly alter IQ, "they do substantially raise the non-cognitive skills and social

competence of participants," which are critical for learning, motivation and self-esteem.

Heckman argues the returns to human capital investment are greatest for the very young for two reasons: first, younger people have a longer period of time over which to recoup the returns on their investments; second, skill begets skill, early learning begets later learning and early success breeds later success.

Mustard has another proposal that could also improve the prospects for early childhood development. Take the responsibility away from social welfare ministries and put it instead in education ministries, renaming education departments ministries of human development. Heckman agrees.

This would at least put early childhood development where it more properly belongs and recognize explicitly the lifelong nature of education. It might also give early childhood development the priority it needs. For the sake of the young, and our country, we should replace lip service with real service.

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