

Harris misses chance at a legacy [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

MIKE HARRIS will soon step down as Premier of Ontario. When he does, he will leave unfinished what could have been his most important legacy for the future,, the positioning of Ontario as the best place in the world for early-childhood development.

Harris created great expectations in 1998 when he called on Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain to produce a report on early-years development. This was not just an issue of social policy. Any society that cares about its future economic well-being has to give top priority to its future generations.

It is well-established that the years up to 6 are critical in the formation of the brain, which, in turn, shapes our health, behaviour, learning capabilities and coping skills in adult life. A stimulative, nurturing and stable environment is essential for healthy development of the brain. So programs to support parents and children can make a big difference in the quality of societies and their ability to do well in a knowledge-based world.

Harris raised expectations further when, on receiving the report, Early Years Study Reversing The Real Brain Drain, in April, 1999, he directed Margaret Marland, the Minister Responsible for Children, to implement the recommendations while he took on the children's agenda as a personal campaign. He sent the report to his fellow premiers and to the federal government. In September, 2000, the federal and provincial governments reached a groundbreaking agreement on Health Renewal and Early Childhood Development.

Yet despite this great promise, the early-childhood development project in Ontario falls far short of what might have been, and virtually none of the recommendations of the Mustard-McCain report has been implemented. While the Ontario government is currently running full-colour newspaper ads and radio commercials implying it has implemented the children's agenda, the facts show quite the opposite.

First, the government ignored a key recommendation, which is what early-childhood development and parenting centres should do.

As envisaged in the report, these centres would provide parent support, including non-parental care arrangements, and education; play-based, problem-solving learning guided by early-childhood educators and parents; toy and resource libraries, family events, nutrition programs and information and referral services; and prenatal and postnatal supports.

The report also stressed that in the cultural diversity of the province, there was no single institutional structure that would work, though it was suggested that schools, churches, recreational sites and even some workplaces would be good locations.

But it did envisage that "as children grow from infancy into the preschool years, most will participate in centre-based, early-childhood development programs on a regular basis." But what the Ontario government is boasting about in its advertising campaign on Early Years Centres appears to be little more than information centres. The centres are not getting funding for day-care support; they are not being placed around the community; instead, there is only one such centre for each riding in the province; they are not based on community need or support. This bears no relationship to the Mustard-McCain vision.

Equally disturbing, instead of the province providing support to community-based endeavours, Ontario politicians and bureaucrats are overriding local initiatives and exercising rigid control. This reflects a bigger problem with the government It does not trust communities to run their own affairs. The early-years program is being controlled by Queen's Park in the same way that our schools, municipalities and health-care system are.

Tens of thousands of hours have been spent by community volunteers, business groups and charitable organizations crafting community-based initiatives based on an enthusiastic response to the Mustard-McCain report, showing what community initiative can do, only to have them rejected by political and bureaucratic managers at Queen's Park. Community-based volunteer groups that had been appointed by the provincial government are now being wound up.

So what started out with such great promise is now a mess,, a project that falls far short of the expectations that were raised when Harris first took up the issue.

In Finland, youngsters up to age 7 have a legal right to a place in centre-based or home-based early childhood education and care. This kind

of progressive approach could have been the Harris legacy in Ontario. Unfortunately, it won't be.

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