

# Early learning is the path to prosperity [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

### Commentary:

As a small nation, our ability to compete hinges on skill and innovation. That starts with early-childhood education.

Charles Pascal's report to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty, which contains recommendations that lay the foundation for a universal prenatal-to-age-12 child-and-family system, truly sets a new benchmark for Canada.

The report released this week by Mr. Pascal, a former deputy education minister, is grounded in evidence. The science underlying early learning is expanding all the time; the debate surrounding it and the conclusions drawn from it are simply too important to ignore.

This doesn't mean that the report, which proposes all-day kindergarten and school-centred child care for four and five-year-olds, won't have its detractors. But, as two people who have made early-childhood development a central focus of our contribution both inside and outside public life, we would like to make the following comments.

The first thing is to better explain to skeptical parents that early learning is neither about asking their daughter to sit down at a desk too early nor about stealing their son's childhood. And it certainly is not about interfering with parenthood. Early learning is about choice; choice that today is not available for far too many families. Without an elaborate system of early learning and child care, there is no choice.

Unfortunately, some have said the current economic situation makes Mr. Pascal's blueprint impractical. The truth is quite the opposite. Early-childhood development should be an essential part of any stimulus package. More than anything else, it is the gift that keeps giving.

When told that early learning is something Ontario just can't afford at this time, ask about the paradigm shift. In 1945, governments were hampered by the huge costs of the Second World War, yet they began to invest in the social infrastructure that we have today: better health care, better pensions and better education. That was intelligent stimulus. The confidence that this gave Canadians set Canada on the longest unbroken period of prosperity that we have ever known.

Today, we are going through another paradigm shift, one that has been accelerated by the current financial crisis. Despite the small size of Canada's domestic market, we have enjoyed the advantage of a common border with our major export partner, the United States, which for most of our lives has been the engine of growth for the entire world. All this is about to change. The U.S. economy will continue to grow, but it will no longer be alone as the driver of the global economy. China, Brazil, India and an expanded Europe are now driving the global express.

Our problem is that none of these countries share a common border with us, and the world is about to get a whole lot more competitive. India's high-technology base already dwarfs our own. China graduates more engineers in one year than we have in all of Canada. Our 33 million people are going up against populations that exceed a billion. We are not going to compete with them on the basis of the numbers of people we have. We are going to compete on the basis of skill and innovation.

This is why early learning is the pathway to the future. In short, we can not afford to waste the talents of one child. Early learning and child care are moral issues, but let there be no doubt that they are also among the most important economic initiatives a government can put forward. The time to implement them is when the need to strengthen the economy is greatest. And the time to strengthen our economy is now.

Former New Brunswick lieutenant-governor Margaret Norrie McCain and former prime minister Paul Martin are passionate advocates for quality early-childhood education.

- reprinted from The Globe and Mail

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