

Early learning makes business sense [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There was a time when early childhood education was a fancy name for daycare. Women knew they couldn't convince politicians to support working mothers, so they made the case that investing in children was good public policy.

Then science caught up to semantics.

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Public opinion began to shift. Early learning was no longer ghettoized as a women's issue. It became everybody's issue, with a few notable exceptions.

Today, most provincial governments and three of the four main federal parties accept that building a national early learning system is the right thing to do.

Last week, Ontario moved from principle to practice, embarking on a long-term restructuring of its education system. Starting next year, the province will phase in full-day learning to 4- and 5-year olds. Eventually, Ontario's schools will serve children from infancy to adolescence, welcome their parents and grandparents, provide basic health services and act as community hubs.

The future would look promising – but for two obstacles.

The first is Prime Minister Stephen Harper's refusal to provide any support for institutionalized child care. The second is lack of money.

Daniel Trefler, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Competitiveness and Prosperity at the Rotman School of Management, believes one strong push from the corporate sector would topple both barriers.

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Trefler delivered one of his high-energy presentations at a recent management conference at the Rotman School.

He began by offering participants an investment with a spectacular yield and no risk. Once he'd captured their attention, he provided an itemized tally of all the paybacks of early childhood education: an increase in the percentage of kids who stay in school, leading to higher employment and earnings; a more skilled workforce, leading to higher productivity; an influx of young mothers into the labour force, leading to higher family incomes; a reduction in health-care and social service costs and a drop in domestic violence and crime. Then he did the math.

"For every dollar you spend, you get \$10 to \$16 back," he said. "Where in the market do you get an ROI (return on investment) like that?"

Next, he provided a layman's summary of the latest findings from the field of neuroscience, showing how a child's ability to think creatively, solve problems, recover from setbacks and manage aggression are largely moulded before he or she reaches school. "There are things you can do in early childhood that can affect a person's life, even into the next generation."

Finally, he laid out the cost of doing nothing. Problems that could have been nipped in the bud will weigh down the economy. Employers will have to look harder – and farther – for qualified workers. Canada will have trouble competing with countries with younger populations.

It bewilders Trefler that so many people in high places see early learning as a kind of glorified babysitting service. It perplexes him that they remain impervious to both economic logic and neurological evidence.

He hails children's activists for putting the issue on the policy agenda. He hopes an enlightened business professor can help.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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