

# Our children, our future <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Mission: Twenty years later, Margaret Norrie McCain's focus is still on nurturing the minds of young children. She hopes politicians won't abandon an issue that transcends politics and election campaigns

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McCain, now 75, is more determined than ever to put what she considers the most important public policy question directly before political leaders. That question, simply put, is: What is society's role to provide for the healthy development of our children in their earliest years? For McCain, the story always must begin with the science, the facts that ground the policy.

Her advocacy with New Brunswick's political leaders is the continuation of years of work that has influenced early childhood development policy around the world.

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"Early child development is tier one in human development," McCain says. "It is in these years when your learning, your health and your behaviours are set."

She gradually became more involved in Mustard's mission. When she was appointed New Brunswick's lieutenant governor in 1994, she invited bureaucrats and cabinet ministers to Old Government House for a nice dinner and seated all of them next to the other invited guests - researchers in early childhood development.

"This is what you call sowing the seeds," she says, sitting back in her armchair and smiling.

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The Early Years Study was released in 1999, to a disappointing response from the Ontario government. However, the study took on a life of its own and travelled the world, influencing governments in Australia, Brazil, Chile, Argentina and Cuba. The study influenced the policy of the World Bank in developing countries.

Mustard and McCain produced a follow-up study in 2002 and 2007, and today they are working on another. The studies merge the science of child brain development with the reality of societal changes that have seen most mothers entering the workforce and more children in need of quality care and nurturing from birth to age six.

At the heart of the recommendations is the extension of parental leave to one year, preferably two, and the creation of early child development centres linked to the existing education system. These centres create a seamless day of care and learning for children aged two to six.

"None of our recommendations is mandatory," McCain says. "They are all optional, so that parents have a choice of staying at home, but by creating something that is high quality, believe me, there is going to be a lot of uptake."

While she continued her work with Mustard, McCain and her husband Wallace decided to create a foundation that would provide funding for the creation of demonstration centres and further research.

"When my husband and I decided that we would move beyond kitchen table philanthropy and create a foundation with some structure and some bones, our plan was that we would be strategic and focused."

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She notes that there is a special need here. In New Brunswick, 59 per cent of the population is functionally illiterate, which means the majority of the population can read at a basic level and get by, but they couldn't comprehend a newspaper.

"You can't be successful if that percentage of your people aren't going to reach their full potential," McCain says, "Investing in our people has to be one of the most important things we can do. We cannot have a successful economy, we cannot have a successful society, if 59 per

cent of our people are functionally illiterate.

So it's hugely important to start investing in children at an early age when the building blocks for their learning potential are set in place."

In 2009, the Graham government launched four early childhood demonstration sites in Bath, Moncton, Robertville and Saint John. In 2010, the government formed a partnership with the McCain Foundation to create five more in Centreville, Keswick, Millville, Perth-Andover and Richibucto. The foundation also provided \$500,000 for an accompanying research program at UNB and the Université de Moncton.

The research program will establish a baseline report on the condition of children coming into the school system now, and then, after a few years of investment in child development centres, determine if there has been an improvement. This kind of research becomes a driver for public policy.

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McCain says that, in an ideal world, all children in Canada beginning at age two would have access to child development centres connected with community schools. The centres would open at 7:30 in the morning and remain open until 6:30 in the evening to accommodate working parents.

The centres would be staffed with teachers and trained early childhood educators. A child wouldn't know the difference between learning and care.

Parents could choose to stay home with their children, or drop them off at the centre in the morning and pick them up on their way home from work. These schools would become the hub of their communities.

How much would such an ideal program cost at the national level? According to University of British Columbia researchers, about \$22 billion a year. (A reasonable estimate would be \$300 million to \$500 million a year in New Brunswick.) This number is large, McCain says, but it would include everything, including paying early childhood educators more, and creating training programs in universities.

The figure is not all new money.

About \$10 billion a year is now being spent across the country in a patchwork quilt of programs with varying degrees of accessibility and quality.

McCain notes that there would be a return for this investment when there is less money being spent on interventions later in life in health care, social services, and transition houses where cycles of violence are being perpetuated.

"Eventually, once you start investing, you get the payback," she says. "Look what we are spending in Afghanistan. So isn't it a matter of priorities?"

-reprinted from the Telegraph-Journal

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** economics <sup>[3]</sup>

child development <sup>[4]</sup>

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