

Early childhood centres work but challenges remain: report ^[1]

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Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 22 Oct 2013

EXCERPTS:

New Brunswick's Conservative government says new research shows its early childhood services plan is working, but the report also warns of major challenges including a lack of communication.

"I am pleased the findings of this comprehensive report support the direction our government is taking with our three-year action plan Putting Children First," Marie-Claude Blais, Education and Early Childhood Minister, said in a statement. "The provincial government is one of the first in Canada to move forward with testing early childhood development services as a way to better integrate early childhood services and support for parents and young children."

Nine early childhood development centres were established as pilot projects in 2009 and 2010. Four were funded by the provincial government and five were funded by the Margaret Wallace McCain Family Foundation, which also provided a grant to evaluate the centres.

The idea of investing in younger children as much as older children had been championed by Margaret Norrie McCain, the province's former lieutenant-governor between 1994 and 1997, who served as a special adviser to the Liberal cabinet on early childhood development.

McCain has argued in the past that these centres will help combat the province's high illiteracy rate.

The Health and Education Group at the University of New Brunswick said in a 127-page report that the centres had showed several benefits:

- Children were less anxious moving from preschool into kindergarten.
- 'Strong satisfaction' from parents.
- Early identification of developmental problems.

However, the report also mentioned three major challenges:

- Transportation and financial challenges made it difficult to help the most vulnerable families.
- Some families didn't know the role early education can play in a child's development, were distrustful of service providers and feared they would lose their children or have their parenting styles judged.
- Poor communication between partners offering services to the same family, lack of understanding about services providers' mandates, and a lack of provincial guidance at the community level.

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