

# Alberta lags in early childhood development: report<sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

The head of a \$16.4-million government-funded project that shows more than half Alberta's young children lag in at least one area of development says she hasn't been able to get commitment from government to follow up the project's recommendations.

The final report of the Early Child Development Mapping Project (ECMap), completed in August and obtained Friday by the Journal, makes six detailed recommendations designed to improve troubling Alberta data on children's physical, intellectual, language, social and emotional development.

The report, called *How are our young children doing?*, was posted briefly online in late October. But Alberta Education asked the project team to hold off releasing the report until government officials could brief Gordon Dirks, Alberta's new education minister.

Project director Susan Lynch said she is anxious to release the report before Christmas.

"I'm afraid the information is just not going to get into the hands of the people who need it," said Lynch, who worked in education for 45 years, including as a principal and superintendent in Edmonton, and served with Alberta Education as a former assistant deputy minister.

"This report really should be a big huge wake-up call for all of us."

The ECMap team spent five years gathering, analyzing and mapping out data from more than 87,000 kindergarten-aged kids to paint a picture of how they are developing across Alberta. The team created an interactive map called LiveAtlas that layers child-development data, socio-economic data, information on community resources, and boundaries for political ridings, health zones, school authorities and more.

Alberta kids are below the Canadian norm for early childhood development; the number of children achieving the appropriate milestones in all five areas of development is a dismal 46.4 per cent, said the team's final report.

"And that is terrible," Lynch said.

The ECMap project officially ended in August, and the team is doing "mop-up" work and will be disbanded at the end of this year, Lynch said. Lynch said she has offered training so government can continue gathering data on children's development every two years.

However, there is no government commitment yet to continue collecting data regularly, she said.

"We really want to see the government continue this work. Otherwise, what a waste of money to do all that work and then not have that ongoing collection of data," said Lynch. "My optimism wanes each day about what will happen next."

The government also needs to support about "community coalitions" established across Alberta during the project. They are made up of people with an interest in early learning - such as teachers, parents, community members, health workers, and daycare workers - who are working to turn the ECMap data into real, locally based initiatives that bolster children's development.

The seven coalitions in Edmonton have done wide-ranging work to remove obstacles to children's early development, developing databases of neighbourhood resources, handing out health information, door-knocking, and organizing events advocating for early-learning supports, said Gloria Chalmers, co-chair of the southeast Edmonton and a retired director for programs for Edmonton Public Schools.

The government is providing "bridge funding" to keep the coalitions going through the end of December 2015. Chalmers said each coalition can apply for up to \$22,500.

"We're hoping we can have some kind of community coalition network that will be a go-to place for early childhood," Chalmers said. "One of the challenges for early childhood is that no one ministry is responsible. There needs to be ... a voice for the early years that pulls together the needs across health and children's services and education to say, how are we doing with our children and how are our children thriving?"

The Alberta Federation of Labour was thrilled when the ECMap program was announced because early childhood education and child care

are such major issues, said AFL president Gil McGowan. The ECMap data "raises some real serious red flags" about child development in Alberta, McGowan said.

"We need good information to make sure we make good public policy. What's troubling to us is that instead of embracing the work of the ECM mapping project, it seems that the government is stepping away from it ... And we're also troubled the government seems reluctant to release the final report."

The government is reviewing the report and "exploring options for the most effective structure" to continue the data-collection work, Alberta Education spokesman Rohit Sandhu said in an email.

#### REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

The final report of the Early Child Development Mapping Project makes several recommendations to government to build a better foundation for Alberta's young children:

- Continue to gather, analyze and share data as part of a comprehensive system that monitors early childhood development;
- Support the community coalitions that have been established across Alberta and refine the boundaries used for mapping;
- Make sure all children have healthy, supportive, nurturing environments to help them develop, no matter what their socio-economic status, disabilities, family circumstances, cultural backgrounds or geographic locations;
- Develop a strategy to help all Albertans better recognize the importance of early childhood development;
- Look at whether qualifications and education requirements for workers in early education fields need to be overhauled;
- Establish a permanent provincial secretariat of human early learning and development that works across departments and has a budget to maximize government support for young children.

**Region:** Alberta <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** advocacy <sup>[4]</sup>

child development <sup>[5]</sup>

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