

Baby onesie campaign pushes for government commitment to early childhood education ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Concerned Alberta communities are mailing baby clothes to the government to raise awareness about the lack of support for early childhood education.

Community coalitions from all over Alberta are now participating in a campaign to mail baby onesies to the office of Education Minister Gordon Dirks to promote their cause: to make sure the government of Alberta works on improving services and intervention for early childhood development.

"I wish I could take credit for the idea, but it wasn't mine," said Bev Parks, executive chair for the Edmonton city-centre coalition. "The idea was to send a onesie or baby socks to the government to make sure they don't lose sight of how important ECD (Early Childhood Development) is in all these communities."

Each onesie will be sent with a small note asking the government to commit its support to early childhood development in communities across the province. The community coalitions are in the process of finding onesies, making their postcards and notes, and getting parents involved.

The campaign comes on the heels of a recent project which attempted to map out data from more than 87,000 kindergarten-aged kids to assess how children are developing across Alberta. It found that 46.4 per cent of children are not meeting appropriate levels of development by the time they enter kindergarten.

"This data was essential to the awareness for educated Albertans to know about the importance of early childhood development," Parks said.

The study made six recommendations to improve Alberta's early childhood education, including continuing to regularly collect data and to support the community coalitions dedicated to the cause. However, there has been no commitment on the government's part to follow through on any of the recommendations.

"We look forward to continuing our conversations with community partners to explore options," a government spokesperson said in an email response.

The NDP criticized the government's lack of response to the project and is calling for all six recommendations to be implemented.

"These kids are our future and the support and nurturing they receive in their formative years has a proven impact on their success," said NDP education critic Deron Bilous in a statement.

According to Parks, many studies show rising rates of graduation and lowered rates of crime in communities that invest in early childhood development.

"The first three years are absolutely crucial to the development of the child," Parks said.

"We're a rich province and unless we start paying attention to the needs of children, we aren't going to continue to have that success."

Although Parks hopes that the campaign will influence government policy, she wants to get Edmontonians and Albertans talking about the importance of early childhood education.

"We're the city of champions. But we need to be a city that champions the importance of children."

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