

# Upstream childcare policy change: Lessons from Canada <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See excerpts and full article attached below with permission from the author.

Attachment	Size
 <a href="#">AEL Australian Educational Leader Susan Prentice childcare policy change July 2016.pdf</a> <sup>[2]</sup>	1.27 MB

## Introduction

In their day-to-day interactions with children, childcare leaders naturally focus on the local scale. Every day, in programs and in front-line settings, it seems to make the most sense to centre on children's immediate needs. Sometimes, however, our reflex to focus on the local scale and immediate needs doesn't lead to best outcomes.

There's a well-known story that illustrates the problem. A kind traveller comes across a large river with a high waterfall. At the bottom of this waterfall, hundreds of people are working frantically trying to save children who have fallen over the waterfall, many of them drowning. As the people along the shore are trying to rescue as many children as possible, the traveller begins to run along the riverbank. One of rescuers calls out, "Don't leave! There are so many people that need help here." The traveller replies "I'm going upstream, to find out why so many children are falling into the river!"

From this parable comes the metaphor of 'upstream' change – solutions that need to be enacted well before a problem manifests itself. Upstream thinking means investing wisely for future success, rather than spending all our time and resources responding to problems.

Good social policy demands upstream thinking. The policy environment shapes our capacity to offer quality early childhood care and education to young children and their families. Urie Bronfenbrenner's famous theory of social ecology (1979) is based on this insight: Bronfenbrenner's model is a bullseye of concentric rings, starting with the individual at the centre, then moving outward through the micro-system, into the meso-system and the exo-system, all the way to the macro-system. At each step, social policy sets the parameters for each ring, regulating what is possible.

Tackling the nested ecological ring of policy environments is challenging, and it asks early childhood educators to step outside their comfort zone, usually beyond their professional training (which too rarely addresses macro-system policy). Often, early childhood educators feel they don't know enough about social policy to make recommendations or to offer better solutions – even when they suspect that systemic 'upstream' change is necessary

Beginning in 2013, in the prairie province of Manitoba, Canada, a group of early childhood educators, allies and activists decided it was time to tackle the province's childcare policy architecture. They designed an innovative campaign with an upstream focus, and proposed it to their provincial government. They asked officials to establish a Commission on Early Learning and Child Care. Remarkably, official decision-makers accepted the call, and launched a Commission. In this article, I review the Manitoba social movement campaign for a new policy architecture.\* Manitoba is more than 13,000 kilometres from Australia, but there are lessons for Australians interested in upstream change, because both countries share important similarities when it comes to childcare policy.

*See full article attached below originally published in AEL Australian Educational Leader – Journal of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, Vol 38, No 2 | Term 2 2016.*

**Related link:** [Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care Commission: Final report](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

**Region:** [Canada](#) <sup>[4]</sup>

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[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/16/01/manitoba-early-learning-and-child-care-commission-final-rep> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/policy> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/social-policies-and-programs>