



October 29, 2013

Dear Hon. Kerri Irvin-Ross, Hon. Kevin Chief, and Deanne Crothers, MLA

We are writing this Open Letter to you, as the Minister for Family Services, the Minister leading the “Starting Early, Starting Strong” provincial dialogue on early childhood development, and the MLA charged with the current public consultation on early learning and child care to urge you to fix a core weakness of Manitoba’s policy architecture for children: the divide between the early learning and child care system and the public education system.

We call upon you to build an integrated public system of early learning and child care (ELCC), drawing on the international best practices identified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). We recommend that you establish a Commission on Integrated Early Learning and Child Care for Manitoba with the mandate and resources to develop and propose a multi-year plan for ELCC. This plan should be based on:

- a systematic and integrated approach to early learning and child care policy
- a strong and equal partnership with the education system
- a universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support
- substantial public investment in services and infrastructure
- a participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance
- appropriate training and working conditions for staff
- systematic attention to data collection and monitoring; and
- a stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation.

Manitoba’s early learning and child care system was established 40 years ago as a voluntary sector service. As a result, today child care centres and family child care homes operate as individual and disconnected stand-alone programs, reliant on community volunteers. The approach to child care is much like the situation of education before 1890, when the *Public Schools Act* turned a ragtag collection of one-room schoolhouses into a provincial system of tax-supported public schools for all children.

Manitoba needs a redesigned early learning and child care system. An integrated system will establish a governance and administrative framework that does not rely on community volunteers to establish and maintain services. It can provide seamless child-centered, accessible, and reliable programs based on a high quality pedagogical framework. An integrated system can meet the needs of modern families by ensuring the strategic allocation and coordinated sharing of community resources, under public management.

There are solid economic reasons to invest in early learning and child care. Long-term cost-benefit studies, as well as short-term input-output analyses, show that child care more than pays for itself. Economists have shown that for every dollar Quebec spends on child care programs, \$1.05 is returned in the form of higher tax revenues and lower spending for the provincial government, with an additional 44-cent benefit returned to the federal government. In 2012, TD Economics recommended that public spending on child care become a top priority. Nobel-prize winning economist James Heckman points out that child care “is a rare public policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large.”

You will know that Manitoba has a shortfall of licensed child care spaces: just 16.6% of the province’s children aged 0-12 years can be accommodated in our licensed system. The province’s waiting list has over 11,400 names. When parents do find a scarce child care spot, they must pay fees. We acknowledge that Manitoba policy helps to make fees affordable, but the cost is still out of reach for many parents. Even though Manitoba’s child care fees are lowest in the country outside Quebec, child care is still very expensive and can cost as much as a year of university tuition. Very low-income parents can qualify for a fee subsidy in a licensed facility, but even parents living under the poverty line are charged \$2/day per child. Because of a lack of licensed spaces, most children are cared for in unregulated informal care, where there is no monitoring of health, safety, and wellbeing. The early childhood educators who care for our children in licensed programs earn low salaries that fail to compensate fairly their skills and responsibilities, so there is a shortage of ECEs and turnover is high. While provincial regulations promote quality and have relatively strong educational requirements, over one-third of Manitoba’s centres are unable to comply with the *Community Child Care Standards Act* because enough trained staff cannot be recruited and retained.

Research shows the value of early learning and child care can be very high. A major review of the evidence concludes the positive relation between child care quality and virtually every facet of children’s development is “one of the most consistent findings in developmental science.” (Shonkoff and Phillip, 2000). Researchers find that while child care of poor quality is associated with poorer developmental outcomes, high-quality care is associated with positive outcomes such as co-operation with adults, the ability to initiate and sustain positive exchanges with peers, and early competence in math and reading. Quality childcare services can thus help children enter school ready to learn and succeed. Given high rates of disadvantage amongst Aboriginal children, child care can also contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty for Aboriginal Manitobans.

Accessible child care helps parents to work or study, and supports parents in balancing their caregiving and paid work. Child care is especially important to women, since it is mothers whose paid work is most affected by the lack of service. Women’s social equality, participation and citizenship are compromised when child care is inaccessible or unaffordable and when their caregiving labour is undervalued. Child care helps promote social inclusion for the children, parents and families who use it. Cultural diversity and social inclusion including recognition of the rights of Aboriginal, francophone, and minority communities, is enhanced where quality ELCC services exist for children and families.

We know that how we educate and care for our children is central to future child outcomes, social justice and equality, and economic prosperity. We look forward to working with you to create a made-in-Manitoba, fully integrated, public system for early learning and child care.

Respectfully submitted,

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Susan Prentice,
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