

## **Two commissions, same advice for New Brunswick early years**

*By Margaret McCain*

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Two government-commissioned reports were released this month in Fredericton. One focused on an education plan for the future, the other on childcare. Both identified the need to expand access to early childhood services and to improve their quality.

The findings would come as no surprise to provincial policy makers. New Brunswick has made early childhood a priority for over a decade. A [report](#) out the University of Toronto, which independently assesses provincial early childhood education systems, ranks New Brunswick among the most improved in addressing its service deficiencies but notes it still has a way to go. If the province is to realize its big goals: raising literacy levels, improving workforce skills, reducing chronic health problems and growing its population, a robust early education and care system is foundational.

The authors of the childcare report were asked to map a plan to stabilize and improve the province's fragile mix of early learning and care programs. The education commissioners took a new look at learning, acknowledging it as a life-long journey beginning at birth. In retrospect their two missions should have been combined.

Polling indicates Canadians understand and value public education, placing it only behind health care as a public good. As such we legislate it as a child's right, invest in it and provide public oversight. Canadians are less familiar with childcare and are unsure where responsibility lies for its provision.

The source of the dilemma is twofold. Childcare provides public benefits. It allows parents to work generating greater tax revenues, reduced social costs and more labour flexibility. An [analysis](#) of the social and economic benefits of investments in New Brunswick childcare found every public dollar returned \$1.30 in economic benefits to the province. However, childcare is also overwhelmingly privately owned. Vested interests welcome government

investment providing the oversight is scant. Even the tentative recommendation of the commission that over time childcare become more publicly managed created controversy. Government regulation challenges an entrepreneurial model of childcare.

Secondly, whom does childcare primarily serve? Childcare policy designed to underwrite women's participation in the workforce is decidedly different than policy driven to benefit children. If childcare is someplace for the kids to go while mom works, safe and warm will do. If, like education, childcare is seen as a children's right issue public policy takes a different turn. Trained staff, resourced programs, public accountability and open access to all children, regardless of their parents' job status, take centre stage because these are essential to supporting children's development.

The paradox is not insurmountable. It is possible to simultaneously promote children's development while supporting parents to work and derive the benefits of both approaches. The education commission suggests targets to improve outcomes for all preschoolers, particularly the most vulnerable. These should be defined and adopted. New Brunswick also has considerable assets in its public schools many that are underutilized and could be repurposed to include younger children. By combining education and childcare, children become the undisputed focus and New Brunswickers may also develop a better understanding of early education and its rewards.

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