

In Search of Evidence

November 2014

Inspired by the late Fraser Mustard, a report was recently released regarding the progress of early childhood education in Canada. This report provides a stark contrast between this remarkable man of science and one of our nation's leading evidence-avoiders, Stephen Harper.

It's been three years since Stats Can's final long form census provided valuable information for Canadian researchers and decision-makers. Along with dumbing down our once highly regarded statistical agency, our prime minister has invested in costly and ineffective crime-related initiatives while crime in Canada is waning and he continues to lead the world's climate change ostriches. Simply put, Mr. Harper has turned Ottawa into an evidence free zone. It's also been three years this month since we lost Dr. Mustard, one of Canada's premier evidence-makers.

Dr. Mustard, known in the cardiology community for his research on the benefits of aspirin, is more recently known for his Canadian and worldwide leadership on what brain science has told us about the impact of quality early child education on the life chances and opportunities for children. With death's door approaching in early 2011, Dr. Mustard encouraged his colleague, the Hon. Margaret McCain, to put out a third and final "early years" report to complete a trilogy of influential reports on the science of the brain that supports the critical importance of early childhood education. The key feature of this report was the creation of an early childhood education "index" that provides independently gathered and publicly reported data regarding how each Canadian jurisdiction is doing in creating quality programming, appropriate funding and accountable governance.

Why is this work so important? First, it pulls back the curtain on which provinces and territories are making progress and how each needs to progress further to seize the social and economic benefits of quality early childhood education for the nation's children. This recent edition of the "index" idea, released by Mrs. McCain, reveals a good deal of progress by the provinces with much more to do. Despite increased investments by provincial governments, far too many children are still denied access to pre-school with countries as disparate as Mexico and the UK doing far better than Canada. Overall, this kind of accountability reporting is about evidence-based decision making.



This work also calls further attention to the Prime Minister's ideological myopia when it comes to science. When Mr. Harper was elected to form a minority government in early 2006, he threw the climate-change Kyoto protocol on the scrap heap and later ignored the progress promising Kelowna Accord for Aboriginal peoples. Mr. Harper also scrapped a third pan-Canadian deal that had been negotiated by his predecessor Prime Minister Paul Martin and his key minister, Ken Dryden, -a national early childhood program that included an accountability plan.

Based on the scientific and return on investment research, it is hard to imagine a more important nation-building initiative than high quality early childhood education, yet Mr. Harper eschewed the evidence and eliminated a national framework to guide a consistent national approach to issues of quality and accessibility. So, while we do not have a national program, we have provinces on the move, a kind of bottom-up approach.

These regularly released McCain/Mustard accountability reports will foster the kind of learning among and between our pan-Canadian jurisdictions that will take us closer to a time when what it means to be a child in Canada has common meaning, whether she or he lives in Cavendish, Thunder Bay, St. John or Kelowna.

Somewhere down the line, hopefully sooner rather than later, a newly elected federal government that embraces the rare notion of evidence-based politics, will run to the front of the parade and become a partner in something that is so evident in its nation-building qualities. Those who worked closely with Dr. Mustard know of his recurring admonition that we desperately need to close the gap between what we know and what we do.

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