EARLY YEARS STUDY 3:

MAKING DECISIONS, TAKING ACTION

A SUMMARY PROVIDED BY THE PEDACS – EASTERN REGION

"The *Early Years Study 3* (EYS 3) builds on two previous studies by Margaret McCain and Fraser Mustard. EYS 1 revealed how experiences in early childhood (from conception on) shape the architecture and function of the brain, with lifelong consequences for the individual and for society. EYS 2 with Dr. Stuart Shanker argued for a policy framework to improve population health outcomes. In the *Early Years Study 3* we update the social, economic and scientific rationale for investing in early childhood education and introduce the Early Childhood Education Index, a tool for monitoring progress in the funding, policy, quality and access of early childhood education." (p.2, Early Years Study 3 PowerPoint, 2012).

KEY SUMMARY

⇨ **Mothers are an important part of the economy**

Investing in mothers-to-be and mothers of young children is key to economic and social stability; early investments are better and less costly for society.

"Family economic well-being is highly dependent on mothers working. The rate of poverty in one-income households is 21%, but drops to 4% for two income households. Canada couldn't function without mothers' employment. A study by the Vanier Institute (2011) estimates tax revenues would drop $35-billion annually if mothers stayed home." (p.4, EYS 3 PowerPoint)

⇨ **1 in 4 children start out vulnerable**

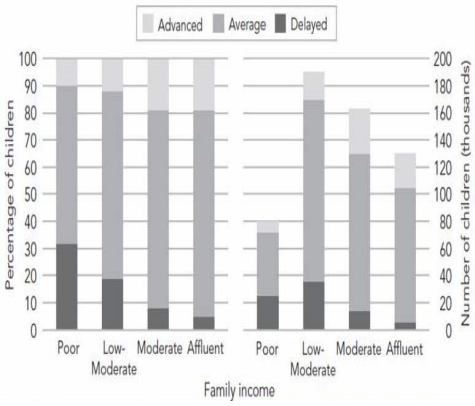
The majority of our provinces measure children's readiness for school by using the Early Development Instrument (EDI). Kindergarten teachers use this instrument to assess children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development.

National data shows that more than one in four children begins kindergarten with vulnerabilities.

"Many factors influence child outcomes. The health and abilities a child is born with are primary, followed by the home environment, including the socioeconomic status of the family, the educational attainment of the parents and family income. Preschool and primary school are important outside influences." (p.6, EYS 3 PowerPoint)

Although children in low-income families face disadvantages compared to children from middle-class families, there also exists a noteworthy learning gap between children from middle-income and higher-income families:

FIGURE 2.9 Vocabulary skills in children ages 4 and 5 years by family income



⇨ **Learning, behaviour and health**

We are all shaped by both "nature and nurture," or a combination of our genes and our environment. Socio-economic status is an environmental factor that can strongly impact children's development.

A person's socio-economic status reflects their material wealth as well as other factors, such as their social standing and level of education. It has been reliably associated with several outcomes: as socio-economic status improves, on average so do learning, behavior and health. This gradient pattern has also been linked to early brain development in important areas, including the limbic and prefrontal cortex systems.

⇨ **Creating spaces and places for young children and families**

"A new picture of childhood and human nature emerges from the research of the past decade. Far from being mere unfinished adults, babies and young children are exquisitely designed by evolution to change and create, to learn and explore. Those capacities, so intrinsic to what it means to be human, appear in their purest forms in the earliest years of our lives. Our most valuable human

accomplishments are possible because we were once helpless dependent children, not in spite of it. Childhood, and caregiving, is fundamental to our humanity." (p. 47, EYS 3, 2011)

Today's families are increasingly diverse, and are faced with many challenges of modern life. Addressing these challenges through early intervention is key to building a healthier society and future for our children. Providing supports for working parents is a good place to start.

There are several actions that may help bridge the gap between when parental leave ends and children begin school. For example: using schools that are underutilized to create new programs; switching to full day kindergarten; and extending parental leave to 18 months.

⇨ What does early childhood education offer to children and families?

When early childhood education is discussed among policy makers and researchers, the focus is often on supporting children with behavioral, learning or health problems. Those who are doing well, however, are often overlooked; these children could also benefit from additional attention. Children who are physically and emotionally healthy need new experiences and challenges to stimulate their growth. A stimulating environment with positive interactions can be beneficial for all children. Basic physical needs such as nutrition, safety, hygiene and health care are essential for ensuring each child's sense of security.

A safe environment in which a child can discover the world, engage in vigorous and sustained play and feel accepted is essential for their healthy development.

⇨ Quality is linked to better outcomes

Whether in an early learning setting or a school kindergarten program, a curriculum with specific goals provides an optimal framework for children to learn and grow. Within this framework, children's overall development can be improved by having quality educators employ evidence-based practices. Young children benefit most from a child-directed curriculum in the active presence of an educator; this allows them to explore and learn through child-initiated play. A proper balance of freedom and structure ensures effective programs.

⇨ Educators matter

Skilled and qualified Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) play an essential role in optimizing children's early learning experiences. Aware of children's developmental needs and trained to support their healthy growth, quality ECEs can both assist and scaffold preschool children's learning in a variety of areas. Financially, however, space concerns often outweigh the need for quality care. An integrated systems approach to childhood services could improve access to skilled ECEs, but would require strong leadership and direction to overcome the many barriers to change.

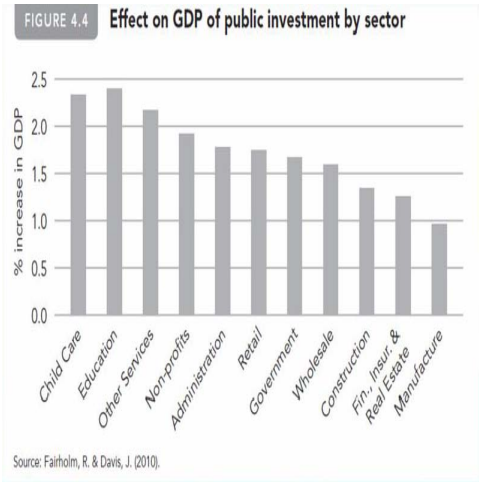
"Real integration demands new ways of thinking." (p.57, EYS 3)

⇨ Early childhood education as economic development

"Early childhood education is economic development, and the research shows it is economic development with a very high public return. Just a decade ago, this statement would have been dismissed. Spending on programs for young children was viewed as consumption—an immediate cost to the economy. The first Early Years Study (1999) furthered thinking by linking participation in quality early childhood programs to economic outcomes. Almost immediately the audience for early childhood concerns swelled, engaging economists, scientists, health providers and even financers." (p.63, EYS 3)

Investing in early childhood education improves economic growth and its subsequent outcomes. At the child level, human capital is enhanced and lower health and social expenses for children are recorded.

Robert Fairholm's research reveals child care is the biggest job creator (2009). He also quantifies the effect of child care spending on the GDP. The tax revenue generated from spending in early childhood education sends back about 90 cents in taxes to federal and provincial governments for every dollar invested.



⇨ Public policy shapes early childhood programs

"In Canada, education and child care fall primarily within the jurisdiction of provinces and territories, although federal involvement has a long history, both through transfers to individuals and to provincial and territorial governments. While the federal government can be accused of being an inconsistent player in early childhood policy, it has been influential in helping to shape

provincial and territorial programs and priorities." (p.75, EYS 3)

⇨ Policy developments in the provinces and territories

Challenges seen at the federal level can also be seen at the provincial level. Duplication, over-regulation and diffusion of responsibility for services often complicates and compromises program funding, access, quality and accountability. The study expands on several challenges that exist:

Governance

The early years sector lacks a coherent framework for governing its services. Although the EYS 2 had preemptively urged for their integration, delivery of education and child care services remains separate. Families and services providers continue to face multiple challenges due to this divide.

Funding

Public funding for childhood services is low and is mainly geared towards encouraging operators to create and expand their services. Two approaches exist when it comes to funding regulated child care: funding families and funding programs. With an overall lack of funding, directing funding effectively is crucial: *"Funding into operating grants appears to have a positive impact on wages and program stability, whereas funding through fee subsides or tax transfers have little or no effect."* (p.84, EYS 3)

Access

Many factors can influence a family's use of child services, not all of which are controllable. Barriers to services may include: service availability, location accessibility, hours of operation, affordability, and cultural sensitivity. Additional barriers may exist due to health and social difficulties, and parents' awareness of the importance and benefits of early childhood education.

In most provinces, child care remains a separate entity from education. With full day learning becoming more and more popular, school-based childcare seems to be the best option. Difficulties such as loosing child care ECEs to the school system may create new conflicts.

Learning Environments

Quality educators are more likely to provide children with an optimally stimulating learning environment. Recognizing educators by providing them with a reasonable salary, benefits, and a good working climate can only create a better learning environment for children. However, educators face considerable salary gaps between provinces, as well as between the private child care sector and school boards. In addition to these inequalities, ECEs may also face a lack of professional development, advancement opportunities, as well as systems and social barriers.

Curriculum

Early childhood education and school operated programs do not share the same curriculum frameworks. A child-directed curriculum exists in the early years sector, while schools adopt a more educator-guided approach. The transition from child care to school can thus create challenges. Provinces such as Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia have been working on bridging the gap by linking these two very different frameworks.

Accountability

Monitoring is an essential part of any program; it informs evidence-based decision-making regarding resource allocation and goal achievement. Information from several sources of data can be pooled together to better identify what children's needs are and to what extent they are being met. These may include the Early Development Instrument (EDI), socio-economic data, demographic data, and program data.

⇨ Next Steps

Since the publication of the first Early Years Study in 1999, Canada has seen several policy and programming changes that have benefitted children and their families. Longer parental leave, increased benefits and support programs for families, universal newborn screening, the creation of additional child care spaces, and nearly nation-wide implementation of the Early Development Instrument are some of the positive outcomes. In addition, there has been a growing interest in aligning early childhood policies across early years departments, resulting in today's continuing efforts to integrate education and early learning.

⇨ What the future holds

Canada is already on its way to making positive policy and programming changes in its early years sector. With mounting evidence, tools, success stories and advocates, universal early childhood education is much closer to being a reality than it was twelve years ago.

"Good early childhood education will improve every child's chance of success. It is fair. It works. It is affordable. It enjoys widespread popularity, and we are already well on our way to making it happen." (p.99, EYS 3)

"The big story behind the index is that high-quality, publicly funded preschool education for all 2- to 5-year-olds isn't a utopian fantasy, particularly if it is built on the asset we already have in public education. Early childhood education leverages the best from other family policies and allows every child to reach her fullest potential." **(p.102, EYS 3)**

"The Early Childhood Education Index 2011 provides a snapshot of provincial early childhood education services. Fifteen benchmarks reflect a common set of core standards essential for the delivery of quality programming. Backed by good data, the index: points to the strengths and weaknesses in individual jurisdictions; highlights what leading jurisdictions have been able to achieve in practice and directs attention toward creating comprehensive early childhood education "systems rather than allowing developments to be determined by short-term pressures." (p.99, EYS 3)

Early Childhood Education Index 2011 | For detailed provincial and territorial profiles visit: http://www.earlyyearsstudy.ca

Benchmarks	Value	NL	PE	NS	NB	QC	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC
Integrated governance											
ECE under common department/ ministry	0.5		0.5		0.5		0.5		0.5		
Common ECE supervisory unit	0.5						0.5				
Common ECE policy framework	1		1			1		1			
Common local authority for ECE management and administration	1										
Funding											
At least two-thirds of child care funding goes to program operations1	1		1	1		1		1	1		
Mandated salary and fee scale	1		1			1		1			
At least 3% of budget devoted to early childhood education	1					1					
Access											
Full-day kindergarten offered	1		1	1	1	1	1				1
50% of 2–4-year-olds regularly attend an ECE program	1					1	1				
Funding is conditional on including children with special needs	1		1					1			
Learning Environment											
Early childhood curriculum/framework	0.5		0.5		0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Alignment of early childhood framework with kindergarten	0.5		0.5		0.5	0.5	0.5				0.5
Programs for 2–4-year-olds require at least two-thirds of staff to have ECE qualifications	0.5			0.5		0.5	0.5	0.5			
Kindergarten educators require ECE qualification	0.5		0.5				0.5				
salaries of early childhood educators are at least two-thirds of teacher salaries	0.5					0.5					
ECE professional certification and/or professional development required	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5			0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Accountability											
Annual progress reports are current and posted (2008 or later)	1		1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1
Program standards for ECE programs (including kindergarten)	1										
EDI or population measure for preschool learning collected and reported	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	15	**1.5**	**9.5**	**5**	**4.5**	**10**	**6.5**	**7.5**	**4.5**	**3**	**4.5**

Notes:
1 Includes special needs funding
2 In Early Years Centres only
3 Quebec was not a signatory to the federal/provincial/territorial early childhood development agreements where the parties agreed to regular standardized reporting. Quebec has its own mechanisms for public reporting.

References:

McCain, M.N., Mustard, J.F., & McCuaig, K. (2011). *Early Years Study 3: Making Decisions, Taking Action*. Toronto: Margaret & Wallace McCain Family Foundation.

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Fairholm, R. (2011). *Economic impacts of early learning and care.* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/Events/Economic_Forum.html

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