

## What We Owe Our Children

by Dennis Cochrane, president, St. Thomas University, Fredericton

Children beginning elementary school this September who progress through secondary school to a four-year post-secondary education will graduate in 2026, the year of our self-imposed goal for self-sufficiency.

Far too many of these children are already disadvantaged by a late start to the best possible education. What's worse, this situation is mostly because of a system that we've created.

New Brunswick needs a more seamless, efficient system of providing education services – both schooling and social services – that will make our province a leader in childhood education. Our children deserve no less if we are going to move our province ahead in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

These changes which can begin on Day 1 of the next government will help our children-the new self-sufficiency generation.

1. Create the Department of Education as the lead ministry for all early-childhood services.

This would result in one department being responsible for children and their social and educational development from birth-21 years of age. The goal of this reorganization is to create a seamless transition as children progress through the continuum removing artificial barriers that our current system of silos has created. This change has been taking place in many provinces including Prince Edward Island, Ontario, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Nunavut, and in at least 9 OECD countries.

More and more studies advocate bringing early childhood development into the school system and consolidating responsibility for our children's social services and education services in one department. Moss and Bennett list the following reasons for consolidating children's progress in one department:

- The primary focus of education is children.
- Contemporary education theory recognizes that children are learners from birth and promotes the importance of lifelong learning.
- Unlike welfare-based services, education offers universal access and a strong infrastructure (financing, training, support, curriculum, data collection, evaluation and research).
- Education is a publicly recognized and publicly supported system.<sup>1</sup>

Our current system allows bureaucrats to hide behind their funding model, legislative silos, existing programs, and their "professional" designations. Many reforms end at a 'major victory' of

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<sup>1</sup> Moss, P. & Bennett, J. (2006) *Toward A New Pedagogical Meeting Place/Bringing Early Childhood Into the Education System*. Briefing paper for a Nuttfield Educational Seminar: September 16, 2006. Available at: [www.childcarecanada.org/res/issues/blending.htm](http://www.childcarecanada.org/res/issues/blending.htm)

‘improved co-ordination’ with our political leaders speaking of ‘progress’. One cannot lose site of the fact that departments should exist to deliver services to the client not serve as a safe haven for bureaucrats led by a minister or deputy minister. Let’s move from a system based on “Yes, Minister” to “Yes. Let’s Do It”.

## 2. *Develop New Brunswick Schools as “Centres of Care”*

We all know that schools are the center of our communities. We also know that huge capacity exists in our schools as a result of the declining school population. Since 1991, K-12 school enrolments have declined by 34,000 students or 24%. By 2020, that number is expected to reach a decline of 54,000 or a 39% decrease in our student population over twenty years. Startling yes, but it is our reality.

Rather than focus on closing schools – often in rural locations – efforts should be made to co-locate services in an integrated-service delivery model designed around the core services that families need. As their children progress through the education system, the other vital services are there for these families.

The school would become the single point of entry for education, child and family services, operating with integrated policies and practices guiding educational professionals. These centers could house early childhood (pre-natal services) public and private daycares; pre-school classes; health services such as hearing and vision clinics; library services for adults and children; family-support services; community recreational services; CAP sites for promoting computer literacy, speech-language pathology diagnostic testing; sites for adult literacy training and social development courses,

Rather than a top-down, cookie-cutter model developed by the bureaucracy, these centres should reflect the diverse needs of families and communities, both of which would be involved in governance and planning. (This approach would also not create a huge additional burden on the school principal and teaching staff.) Already “School Plus” projects are being piloted in New Zealand, Saskatchewan, and Nova Scotia where government service providers are helping schools to deliver these services.

The potential of families, communities, educators, service professionals, and government working together is unlimited — doors would be opened and barriers would come down.

## 3. *Introduce Voluntary Early Childhood Programs for Four-Year Olds in New Early Childhood and Parenting Centres located in public schools.*

Some children in New Brunswick have access to education programs before they enter kindergarten, but many do not. And too often, those who need early childhood programs the most can’t access them, or their parents are limited in what they can afford. Rural opportunities for childcare programs are also limited, and quality access is not universal throughout the province.

Research conducted by Dr. Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain and published as *The Early Years Study* (1999) and *The Early Years Study* (2007) focused on early human development and acknowledges

that modern families need a modern support system, one that places the healthy development of children at the centre but also recognizes that children do not exist in isolation from their families. It called

on governments to invest in the early years at the same rate as older children and to address their developmental need through the creation of early childhood and parenting centres, linked to public education and sensitive to local communities.<sup>2</sup>

McCain found that it was important to “invest in children at an early age when the building blocks for their learning potential are set in place”.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the best solution in New Brunswick is to develop a program for 4 year olds in the public school system.

There are currently 9 pilot projects of this nature operating in New Brunswick in Bath, Moncton, Robertville, Saint John, Centreville, Keswick, Millville, Perth-Andover and Richibucto. These are being sponsored by the Province of NB and the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation. The logistics regarding the design of this province-wide program, the qualifications of the teachers and what outcomes are expected, can be based on the pilots referred to above and the pending evaluations of them.

Schools also can and should be utilized to provide day care services for children under the age of 4 by either private, public or not for profit organizations with the reduced cost of operation due to the location in schools causing the cost per day to be reduced with these reductions being passed on to the parents or to the agency providing subsidies to the families.

#### *What We Owe Our Children*

The provision of a universal, publically-funded, four-year old program is within our reach. Using our schools to provide more services, integrated with the client in mind, is possible and affordable. Leadership in these initiatives should rest in one department with the Minister of Education, one dynamic leader to drive change.

These three steps could represent the most significant change in public education and early childhood services since the introduction of kindergarten. The impact of poverty and parental disengagement on children and their development will be greatly reduced and a seamless efficient system of services to children will be make New Brunswick a leader in the development and education of children. Our children deserve no less and our politicians can deliver no less if we are going to move our province ahead in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*This article was also published by CBC online.*

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<sup>2</sup> *Building the Future: Integrated Children’s Centres*, March 2010 (p.3).

<sup>3</sup> McCain, Margaret. “Our children, our future”, *Telegraph Journal*, 3 July 2010.