

The Early Years Last a Lifetime
Proceedings Report
*Early Child Education is Prudent Economic Development:
An Economic Argument for Quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Newfoundland &
Labrador*
Johnson GEO Centre, St. John's, NL
April 10, 2014

Introduction

Under the auspices of the Jimmy Pratt Foundation, and in collaboration with the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation and the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development, Memorial University of Newfoundland, a day-long symposium was held to identify and better understand the economic arguments that support investments in early childhood education and learning within the context of Newfoundland and Labrador. This was the second session in the series on Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Newfoundland and Labrador organized by the Pratt Foundation.

There were approximately 50 participants in attendance including individuals involved and/or interested in early childhood development, education, learning, and care and the future it holds in the province. As well there were three guest speakers:

1. Mr. Craig Alexander, Senior Vice-President and Chief Economist, TD Bank
2. Dr. Pierre Fortin, Professor, Université du Québec à Montréal
3. Dr. Alvin Simms, Professor, Geography Department, Memorial University

The symposium was also streamed live on the internet with the support of the Harris Centre.

Guest speakers and their presentations

As host of the symposium, Ms. Kathy Pratt LeGrow, Chair, Jimmy Pratt Foundation, welcomed participants and guest speakers and provided the background and rationale for the event. Then she introduced members of the McCain and Jimmy Pratt Foundations who were attending the session.

Kathy referred to several information initiatives in support of early childhood education that the Jimmy Pratt Foundation has undertaken over the past four months. She made particular reference to the NL Government's Budget 2014 announcement on full-day kindergarten, noting that while not due solely from the work of the Foundation, the fact that the Foundation and others in the community were advocating for such an initiative likely was heard by government and factored into their decision. She commented that based on this development there is even more incentive to continue to push for other elements of an effective ECE strategy in the province.

Kathy concluded by promoting the next event in this series that will be held in May.

Following on Ms. LeGrow, Mr. Craig Alexander, Senior Vice-President and Chief Economist, TD Bank, gave a presentation on the economic arguments in support of investing in ECE. In his presentation, Craig made the following key points:

- Companies need to consider both their short-term and long-term skills needs; thus investing in childhood education is essential leading to both short-term and long-term payoffs; and that there is a need for more corporate champions in support of ECE
- There are positive impacts from ECE: (i) on children with bigger returns for children from disadvantaged backgrounds; on parents (i.e. more women in workforce; higher household incomes); and on government programs (i.e. less social assistance and less need for special programs)
- The rate of return on ECE spending has been established between 1:1.50 to a high of 1:2.80 but caution should be exercised to not try to oversell these results but demonstrate that this is a positive area for governments to invest
- The lack of access to ECE is leading to income inequalities across Canada and acts as a barrier to labour force participation
- Canada ranks dead last in terms of public investment in ECE when compared to other OECD countries
- The question of why a gap exists between when parental leave expires and access to the public education system begins was highlighted (suggesting that publicly funded ECE is designed to fill this gap)
- Despite the TD report and other evidence, a big challenge remains on raising the awareness of the importance of ECE

A copy of Craig's presentation is available on the Jimmy Pratt Foundation's website.

The next speaker, Dr. Pierre Fortin, Professor, Université du Québec à Montréal, provided participants with an overview of Quebec's experience with their government's policy direction and significant investments in ECE. In his presentation, Pierre made the following key points:

- Equality is a key social/political value in Quebec
- Quebec has a broad-ranging Family Policy of which its highly subsidized ECE program is a significant part (estimated at a \$10,000 subsidy per childcare space)
- There are three macro-economic impacts of this policy: (i) higher female labour force participation; (ii) increase in total provincial income; and (iii) improvement in both federal and Quebec government finances
- There is a strong case for universal ECE system as all income levels benefit which in turn solidifies public support for this public policy
- For Quebec the next steps are to both improve the supply of childcare spaces as well as the quality of the ECE programming offered

A copy of Pierre's presentation is available on the Jimmy Pratt Foundation's website.

The final speaker was Dr. Alvin Simms, Professor, Geography Department, Memorial University. He provided a demographic analysis of NL. In his presentation, Alvin made the following key points:

- The shifts in the NL economy are directly impacting the province's demographic structure
- Various charts and graphs were shown that demonstrated these shifts (de-populated fishing communities and growing urban and sub-urban communities, especially in NE Avalon)
- While the province's population is getting smaller, this is not necessarily a negative impact if, as a result, economic efficiency and productivity increase
- The question remains as to how ECE fits within/supports/influences the province's emerging economy and resulting demographic structure

A copy of Alvin's presentation is available on the Jimmy Pratt Foundation's website.

Following the panel, participants were involved in a large group discussion that focused on three questions:

1. What have we learned in the three presentations that can advance the socio-economic arguments for ECE in NL (i.e. which arguments are the most relevant to NL)?
2. What prevents us from advancing these arguments?
3. What strategies can we suggest to eliminate the barriers to advancing the socio-economic arguments?

A summary of the key points raised in the discussion groups is presented below:

- New immigrants have larger families and require more ESL (English as a second language) support. Retaining those families is critical to ensure a return on investment and population growth.
- The demographics of NL underscore the urgent need to invest in ECE to sustain a skilled workforce, boost the birth rate, and ensure optimal development of our youth. We can no longer afford to have high demand on social programs.
- We are funding illness care and underfunding wellness care. Initiatives aren't aimed at ensuring optimal investment in healthcare, including childcare.
- There is a perception that we are downloading the responsibility of early care to the public sector. We need to present a lifespan perspective on the wisdom of ECE. Public education is imperative.
- Parents need to know what it is they can ask for in relation to quality ECE. Leadership can push and inform the conversations.
- Quality is essential to attain up-take on ECE. Parents have to be assured that spaces are healthy and safe. For example,
 - standards and quality checks are essential
 - provides increased educational opportunities
 - transparency of facilities and programs
- A lack of a public infrastructure results in over-reliance on the private sector.
- Collaboration is essential to push the conversation especially with an absence of public leadership. We each have a responsibility to push this conversation in our own systems, even though it may not be within the immediate ECE sector.
- Advocacy is a combination of quality of message and quality of voice.

- The demographics and economics facing our province necessitates that we “grow down education” to include the early years.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that participants welcomed the information and research pertaining to the rationale for further public investment in expanding ECE programs and services. There was general support of the arguments put forth by C. Alexander and Dr. P. Fortin based on their research and the experience in Quebec. The demographic information on NL put forth by Dr. Simms and its implications for the future of ECE policy was a critical piece of new information for many participants.

The key finding to be drawn from the day’s workshop is that the participants recognized the importance and strength of the economic arguments in support of further public investment in ECE in the province but that they also recognized that these arguments alone will not be sufficient to advance the ECE agenda. Their comments and interventions throughout the day suggest that it will take further analysis and advocacy to inform the public, parents and government officials as to why investing additional public funds in ECE will be beneficial to children and their families, as well as be cost-effective for the larger NL society.

The final proceedings report will be posted on the Jimmy Pratt Foundation website.
