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Boost early learning and care for our children - and for our work force

By Jennifer Wallner and Luc Turgeon
From Monday's Globe and Mail

Our piecemeal provincial approach leaves young parents torn between careers and parenting

It may have been with a sense of trepidation that Canadian parents sent their children back to school this fall, unsure about the quality of education their offspring are really getting. They need not worry. Their children have returned to school in a system that is remarkable for both its organization and its results.

But while it is the best of times for elementary and secondary education, it is, sadly, the worst of times for Canada's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system.

The organization of education in Canada is highly unique. Alone in the industrialized world, Canada has no national department of education, no national educational standards, no overarching regulations for elementary and secondary schooling. Instead, the provinces maintain complete responsibility.

To many observers, this system borders on insanity. Given the significance of education as a doorway to the future, how is it possible to leave it entirely in the hands of separate provincial governments and expect success? At best, it would seem that this model would lead to inefficiencies - at worst, it would permit the emergence of massive inequalities among the systems.

Despite the potential for such problems, the provinces have fashioned a remarkably effective and highly equitable school system. Canada is ranked fourth in the world in high-school completion and its students consistently perform well in international testing.

Furthermore, the provinces accomplish all of this without spending more than their peers. Among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, Canada is one of the most frugal investors in education; the differences in educational spending among provinces are relatively small. For example, in 2001, per-pupil spending ranged from a high of \$8,432 in Manitoba to a low of \$6,239 in Prince Edward Island. By comparison, in the United States, 2005 per-pupil spending ranged from a high of \$13,740 (U.S.) in New Hampshire to a low of \$5,574 in Utah.

To be sure, Canadian education is not without its blemishes. The school dropout rate is disproportionately higher for minority students. The education system is failing many aboriginal Canadians - although, for those who live off-reserve and have access to provincial rather than federally run systems, the success rates are considerably higher. Finally, there are important disparities that separate the provinces from the territories, both in spending and in results. While these problems must be addressed, the educational needs of most Canadians are basically being met.

Child care and early learning is an entirely different story. Parents of children under 6 often struggle to find affordable,

good-quality care services and, according to a report published by Unicef, Canada has one of the worst ECEC systems among industrialized countries.

ECEC falls under provincial jurisdiction, as education does, but early childhood programs and regulations are piecemeal at best, with major differences among the provinces. If you live in Quebec, you have reasonable access to universal and affordable care; elsewhere, the outlook is grim.

In Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver, upper-middle-class families rely on poorly paid immigrant nannies to care for their children. Middle-class parents who do not qualify for child-care subsidies must resort to more informal forms of care, in particular a largely black market of child-minders. In other cases, retired grandparents often become full-time guardians of their grandchildren. Too often, parents are forced to juggle their arrangements, moving their children to multiple caregivers within a single week.

The lack of available child care means that young Canadian parents in every province but Quebec are much more constrained in their choices around work-family balance. The costs and limited availability of services means that Canadians must either limit the number of children they have or make career sacrifices.

The impact on our economy is considerable. The number of work days lost for family reasons by women has increased fivefold between 1976 and 2004. Many Canadian women have had to either interrupt their careers to take care of their children or accept part-time or less demanding positions that provide them with more flexibility. Considering that a majority of university graduates are now women, this lack of services is a critical obstacle to our capacity to face emerging economic challenges.

The irony is that despite these grave failures, it is the more successful education system that faces the most frequent and vocal critiques. It's time to recognize that ECEC can play a vital role in Canada's economic advancement - not only because it will help prepare young children for school, but because it will facilitate a more effective and equitable mobilization of the country's work force.

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