

Canada lagging on early childhood education

GLOBAL ISSUES | Awareness growing about impact on national wealth, says *David Crane*

Sep. 24, 2006. 01:00 AM, Toronto Star

[DAVID CRANE](#)

At a dinner a few days ago on the elegant 40th floor of the Royal Bank in downtown Toronto, co-chaired by Margaret McCain and RBC executive vice-president Charles Coffey, a group of concerned Canadians gathered to discuss the urgent need for early childhood development in Canada and its importance for Canada's future economy.

The group included former Nova Scotia premier James Ham, a family physician until he entered politics and a strong proponent of early childhood development, Stuart Shanker, the new president of the Council for Early Childhood Development and co-author of the important book, *The First Idea*; and Fraser Mustard, Canada's most passionate advocate for early childhood development.

That the gathering took place at the Royal Bank was appropriate because it was Allan Taylor, a former chairman of the bank, who provided the initial funding to launch Mustard on his research and advocacy mission for early childhood development.

More recently, the Mannix family foundations in Calgary have funded the Fraser Mustard Chair in Childhood Development at the University of Calgary to show their support for early childhood development.

Another Calgarian, James Gray, co-founder and former chair of Canadian Hunter Exploration and now a director of Brookfield and CN Rail, has become a strong advocate. Earlier this month he made a presentation to business and government leaders from Canada, the United States and Mexico at the secretive North American Forum in Banff on the importance of early childhood development for prosperity and society.

But coinciding with the RBC dinner was the release of an important

report from the OECD, "Starting Strong II," which found that out of 14 industrial countries, Canada ranked last in public spending on early childhood education and care at barely 0.25 per cent of GDP.

Compare that to 2 per cent in front-running Denmark, about 1.7 per cent in Sweden and Norway, and about 1.4 per cent in Finland. Even the United States was ahead of Canada, at almost 0.5 per cent of GDP, or nearly double Canada's commitment.

This is a disturbing finding because it demonstrates that Canada is not placing a high priority on its children, which, in turn, means that we are not placing a high priority on the future quality of our adult population and their ability to succeed in what will be a much more competitive world.

In future, the premium will be on skills and adaptability and as major advances in neuroscience clearly demonstrate, what happens in the first years of life sets the trajectory for a person's subsequent capacity for learning.

It is in the earliest years of life that brain functions are established, with each stage of development setting the capacity for each next stage in the process of lifelong learning.

The OECD review reports that among societies most concerned with their future competitiveness and about the social benefits of improving life chances for all children there is "a growing consensus — based on research from a wide range of countries covering demographics, social change and cost-benefit analysis — that governments must invest in and regulate early childhood education and care."

But even though important work by Canadians is attracting international attention, our politicians, think tanks and business organizations are largely ignoring what needs to be done.

One of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's first acts was to kill the tentative start of the Martin government in building federal-provincial initiatives for early childhood development. It is a low-profile issue for Liberal leadership candidates and none of our provincial premiers is strongly committed.

Yet as the OECD report makes clear, "the early nurturance of infants and toddlers is seen to be of major importance because of the extraordinary neurological development that occurs in this period.

"Faced by this evidence, it is more difficult for governments to consider large-scale, extra-domestic child care for children under kindergarten age as having little importance for a country's human capital policies."

Except, it seems, in Canada.

Mustard will be devoting more of his time, as a Thinker in Residence in the state of South Australia where the premier and former Rhodes Scholar Michael Rann has committed his state to a highly ambitious program for early childhood development based on Mustard's work.

And Sherry Thompson, a talented government official from Alberta who gave up trying to get anything done there, is now heading South Australia's initiative.

It's one more example of talented Canadians who have to take bright ideas to be implemented elsewhere because too many brain-dead people remain in positions of power and influence here in Canada.

David Crane's column appears on Sunday. He can be reached at crane@interlog.com by email or by fax at 416-926-8048.