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THIRD NATIONAL FORUM ON EDUCATION
Education and Life - Transitions

St. John's, Newfoundland
May 28-30, 1998

PREPARATION FOR LEARNING: PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Reference document coordinated by the Canadian School Boards Association
for the sub-theme on *Transitions Into and Through the School Systems*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Preschool education lays the foundation for individuals to develop fully and to contribute to their communities in ways that foster economic growth, social stability, and prosperity.

Preschool education covers the learning that takes place in children from birth to age 6 and covers learning both within and outside of organized settings. Families, communities, and the formal school system all have a role to play in preschool education.

Child-development experts and brain researchers continually advance our understanding of the magnitude and critical nature of learning during the years from birth to age 6.

In this period of rapid social and economic change being experienced by Canada and other countries, it is important that the needs of preschoolers not be overlooked.

The Perry preschool project demonstrated that when children participated in a quality preschool program they grew up to have higher earnings, obtain more schooling, have fewer arrests, and need fewer social services than individuals who did not participate in this preschool project.

Age-appropriate development ensures that children enter formal school programs ready to benefit from the school learning environment. The learning that takes place from birth to age 6 covers motor development, emotional development, social knowledge, confidence and competence, language skills, general knowledge, and cognitive skills.

Enabling people to develop their skills fully and to avoid the negative effects of not doing so is a worthwhile goal in and of itself. It also makes sense economically. Preschool education programs are cost effective in preventing future expenditures. It has been calculated that a high-quality, public child-care system for 2- to 5-year-olds would return two dollars for every dollar invested in Canada.

Preschool education is integral to ensuring that students who are at risk of difficulty and failure in school systems are able to benefit from them instead. Students with physical challenges, students new to Canada, aboriginal students, and students living in poverty benefit from preschool education. Families, communities, and school systems need flexibility and support in providing preschool services to high-risk children.

Cutbacks in educational funding have resulted in the erosion of many programs for 4- and 5-year-olds. Whether or not provincial ministries are directly responsible for programs, they should consider what steps may be taken to ensure that the erosion of these valuable programs is halted, no matter whether the programs are part of the formal school system or are conducted under the auspices of other agencies.

Both within formal school systems and in preschool education, services to children must reflect the complexities of their lives. A holistic approach to preschool education requires coordination of all services to children. Coordination of the efforts of agencies serving children, the children's families, and communities creates a synergy that will enable society to move ahead in educating young people. Some ministries of education are already engaged in partnerships to provide coordinated services in the preschool years.

Ministers of education should play a key role in moving provincial governments forward in ensuring that preschool learning enables all children to take advantage of school programs. This requires that ministers go beyond their specific jurisdiction in order to influence the factors that enable children to be school ready. Bridges must be built between ministries to make preschool education work.

The Council of Ministers Education, Canada (CMEC) can support preschool education in three key areas. CMEC can consider the appropriate steps it can take to ensuring that quality programs for 4- and 5-year-olds are in place. CMEC can consider what steps can be taken to continue and to strengthen support for holistic and integrated approaches to preschool education. CMEC can consciously monitor preschool education issues, take a leadership role on the issues, and encourage the broadcasting of the positive things that are happening regarding preschool education so that others might benefit from the experiences of successful programs.

Learning begins at birth and is lifelong. Those who are responsible for education within schools must of necessity be concerned with ensuring that there is a panoply of community-based preschool-education supports available to families with young children. Preschool programs have demonstrated lasting effects that benefit individuals and society. When optimal learning and development occur in the years from birth to age 6, there are fewer failures in the school system and fewer costs to society.

PREPARATION FOR LEARNING: PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Ministers of education have direct responsibility for the education of students within the formal school system. Learning, however, is lifelong. The years from birth until a child enters school are in themselves a major period of learning. Indeed, child-development experts and brain researchers continually advance our understanding of the magnitude and critical nature of learning during the years from birth to age 6.

The capabilities that youngsters bring to school determine how the formal educational system functions. Planning programs to expand children's skills depends on the skills that children bring to school.

For the purposes of this discussion paper, *preschool education* has been defined as covering learning, broadly defined and acquired by whatever means, up to age 6. Thus preschool education covers ages 4 and 5 when many children are enrolled in programs within school systems. Preschool education also covers child-care programs, nursery programs, and parent interaction with their children at home. In short, preschool education is the total learning and development that occur within and outside of organized settings.

Families and communities have the major role in supporting the development of young children before they enter and while they are in formal learning programs. The formal education system has a role to play in seeing that families and communities are supported in providing growth and learning for children in the preschool period. Ministers of education directly through their own offices or by cooperating with and influencing others have a role to play in supporting preschool education.

In placing preschool education on the agenda of the Third National Forum on Education, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) is recognizing that preschool education, acquired through parents, communities, and schools, is a major factor in the ultimate success of young people and of the school systems that serve them.

WHY BE INVOLVED?

Canada, along with other countries, is in a period of profound social and economic change. Periods of change can have negative effects on child development and on the population's health and well-being (Keating and Mustard, 1996).

Keating and Mustard (1996) pointed out that the social environment had major effects on development and that the development of competence and coping skills in early life greatly affected outcomes in adult life. According to Mustard (1996), neuroscience has shown us the following:

- brain development before age 1 is more rapid and extensive than previously realized;
- brain development is more vulnerable to environmental influences than suspected;
- the effects of early environment are long lasting;
- the environment affects the number of brain cells and the way they are "wired."

In the first 6 years of life, the groundwork is laid for adult functioning. The child's experiences during this period influence how the brain develops and hence influences future learning capabilities. The learning that takes place from birth to age 6 covers (Doherty, 1997) the following:

- motor development;
- confidence and emotional development;
- social knowledge and competence;
- language skills;
- general knowledge and cognitive skills.

Age-appropriate development in these areas ensures that children enter formal school programs ready to benefit from the school learning environment. Enabling people to develop their skills fully and to avoid the negative effects of not doing so is a worthwhile goal in and of itself. It also makes sense economically.

Human Resources Development Canada sponsored *Zero to Six: The Basis for School Readiness* (Doherty, 1997) in which a thorough examination was made of why and how the preschool period laid the foundation for success throughout life. In this review of the research on school readiness, Doherty (1997) found the skills children brought to school affected progress in high school and whether young people stayed in school or dropped out. The skill levels of youth who left school before graduation were found to be below the skill levels required for most employment. Doherty believed that youth who found themselves unable to obtain work would be a cost to society through:

- lost government revenue;
- increased government expenditures;
- decreased ability to be competitive in the global market;
- decreased ability to provide functions that are essential for the smooth functioning of society as a whole

In support of these points, Doherty (1997) noted the following:

- The Conference Board of Canada determined that dropouts from the high school class of 1987 will cost society more than \$1.7 billion in lost taxes.
- The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, conducted in 1994, revealed that 5% of children between the ages 6 and 11 had repeated a grade, causing society to pay twice for the year repeated.
- If every potential Canadian worker is not productive, in future years there may not be a large enough population of workers for Canada to compete globally.

The Newfoundland review of special education, *Special Matters* (Canning, 1996), pointed out that students who entered the school system unready developed cumulative deficits that had profound effects on the whole system's ability to meet the needs of all students. The Ontario Royal Commission on Learning (1994) in *For the Love of Learning* stressed that effective readiness programs prepared children to benefit from compulsory education at age 6. The closer children are to optimal readiness to function in school systems, the greater the ease with which the learning process can proceed. Capable, successful citizens create a community that fosters economic growth, social stability, and prosperity (Doherty, 1997).

There are many options communities employ to assist families in creating learning environments for their children. Among the options are visiting nurses, liaison social workers, parent-training and discussion groups, play groups, child care, nursery school, book programs, language-stimulation programs, junior kindergarten, and senior kindergarten.

Communities need flexibility to choose the options most appropriate in meeting their needs. Given the infrastructure already in place, however, schools are a likely setting in which to make preschool education universally accessible, whatever the option chosen for the delivery of these services.

IMPACT OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

The well-known Perry preschool project (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993) demonstrated empirically that children who participated in preschool education programs became more successful and contributing adults than children who did not have preschool programs. In this project students were followed from birth to age 27. Some children participated in a preschool program when they were 3 and 4 years old. The programs carried out with the students were appropriate for the development level of the children and used an active approach to learning. When these children became adults, compared to another group who had not had a preschool program, those who had been in the preschool program had:

- fewer special education placements;
- higher earnings;
- higher home ownership;

- more schooling;
- need of fewer social services;
- fewer arrests.

This project illustrates that preschool education has major long-term benefits and implications for success in adult life. It has been calculated that for every dollar spent on the Perry preschool program, seven dollars have been saved in future costs to society.

In a recently reported Canadian study (Philip, 1998), economists Cleveland and Krashinsky showed that a high-quality, public child-care system for 2- to 5-year-olds would return two dollars for every dollar invested. This return would be for all socioeconomic groups, not just for the disadvantaged. Lower dropout rates, higher future incomes, and richer tax revenues would be worth more than \$4 billion a year to Canada.

Flexibility is required so that communities can create support systems, both formal and informal, to enable families to see that children's skills are well developed in the early years of their lives and to address the special needs of some children.

Some children are at special risk of not arriving at school with the requisite skills to engage in formal learning processes. Preschool education plays an important role in ensuring that high-risk children are as ready as possible to benefit from formal school settings.

Students with physical challenges particularly require monitoring and assistance in meeting their educational needs from infancy onward. There should be no discontinuities in service as they enter the school system.

Children who are new to Canada and who are unfamiliar with the culture and language of the school will benefit from educational activities developed in their communities and designed to assist them in acquiring the readiness skills for formal learning.

Another group at risk are aboriginal students, the vast majority of whom, both on and off reserve, live in economic hardship that results in conditions that affect academic achievement (Hanvey et al., 1994). Families and communities need support to develop interventions suited to the development of confident, capable young people.

Children living in poverty are at great risk of not being able to benefit from formal learning programs in the early years. There are many children in Canada living in poverty, one out of every four. Campaign 2000 in its *Report Card 1997* noted the following:

- since 1989 the number of poor children has worsened by 58%;
- since 1989 children in families experiencing long-term unemployment is worse by 47%;
- since 1989 children in working-poor families have increased by 43%.

In *Students in Poverty: Toward Awareness, Action, and Wider Knowledge* (1997), the Canadian School Boards Association emphasized that poverty had strong adverse effects on educational outcomes. The negative influences on education, summarized by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (Hess, 1989), included the following:

- food deprivation, which influences daily concentration and learning;
- inadequate nutrition, which can affect long-term development;
- inadequate adult supervision and child-care arrangements, which limit learning;
- less stimulation, resulting in less motivation to learn, and delayed cognitive development;
- difficult behaviour;
- low self-esteem;
- illiteracy and lower achievement;
- interrupted school attendance;
- dropping out of high school;
- lower university attendance.

Preschool education is now widely seen as a strategy that schools can use to combat the effects of poverty (Levin & Riffel, 1997).

Preschool education has been demonstrated to be cost effective financially and socially. Thus the recent report *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society*, published by Human Resources Development Canada, Minister of Industry, Canada, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1997, called for the universal establishment of preschool programs. Flexibility, planning, and cooperation among agencies will be needed to ensure that community-based services are in place for children from birth to age 6. A variety of agencies and means of delivering services to families with preschool children suited to the particular community are needed to ensure the best development for young children.

The Canadian School Boards Association has taken the lead in drawing together other national organizations to act in partnership in elaborating key issues for CMEC on preschool education. The partners have identified three issues: programs for 4- and 5-year-olds, a holistic approach, and the role of CMEC in relation to preschool education. These issues are interrelated, but are considered individually to emphasize important aspects of preschool education issues.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR 4- AND 5-YEAR-OLDS

Educational programs for 4- and 5-year-olds have shown themselves to be essential in easing the transition from home to school. These programs may be delivered by schools, child-care agencies, cooperation among families, and church groups, depending on the resources of a community.

In a review of the societal issues addressed by preschool programs delivered by school systems, Corter and Park (1993) pointed out that such programs have the following characteristics:

- they are cost effective in reaching students at risk of not being able to keep up in the primary grades;
- they bring parents into partnerships with the educational system;
- they foster ethnocultural acceptance;
- they create connections between the educational and child-care systems.

Educational programs organized by communities under the auspices of agencies other than the school system can be expected to have similar characteristics to those accruing to programs delivered by school systems.

A well-planned play-oriented program also enables adults to identify the learning styles of individual students and to develop programs to meet their learning needs. In the Perry project (High/Scope, 1993), it was demonstrated that high-quality preschool programs had these qualities:

- a developmentally appropriate, active learning curriculum;
- an organized system of inservice training and systematic, ongoing curriculum supervision;
- an efficient, workable method of parent inclusion and involvement;
- good administration, including a valid and reliable, developmentally appropriate assessment procedure; a monitoring system; and a reasonable adult-child ratio.

Examples of excellent programs for 4- and 5-year-olds abound in Canada. Whether these programs are carried out in formal school settings of kindergarten and junior kindergarten, in nursery schools or in child-care settings, public access to free, universal preschool education is imperative. The provision of such services requires financial commitments and cooperation among agencies.

New Brunswick, in recognition of the importance of kindergarten, will move from an optional to a mandatory kindergarten program in September 1998. Quebec now provides full-day kindergarten programs for 5-year-olds in all school boards.

Cutbacks in educational funding, however, have resulted in the erosion of many programs for 4- and 5-year-olds. Whether or not provincial ministries are directly responsible for programs, they should consider what steps may be taken to ensure that the erosion of these valuable programs is halted, no matter whether the programs are part of the formal school system or are conducted under the auspices of other agencies. In addition to the loss of programs, there has been considerable upset in programs, as boards, in response to the unavailability of funds, have opened and closed programs, altered the number of hours contained in programs, changed from full- to half-day programs, and changed from every-day to alternate-day programs.

Children known to be at risk in the school system should have their difficulties identified and addressed, starting as early as possible. Early identification and screening programs provide the information necessary to plan intervention strategies for young children.

Programs for 4- and 5-year-olds play an important part in identifying learning needs that have not been found earlier and in providing activities to strengthen learning in children at risk. In Toronto a federally funded pilot project to screen junior kindergarten and kindergarten students will be carried out in the spring of 1998. The screening process will look for physical, intellectual, learning, and behavioural problems. The screening will provide information on how ready children are for school and on their learning needs in school programs (Monsebraaten, 1998).

A problem area in early identification and amelioration is that frequently services that have been provided by a variety of agencies and other provincial departments can no longer be accessed when children enter school. In addition to providing for students with learning and physical difficulties, care should be taken that aboriginal students, new Canadians, and students living in poverty have their needs met through appropriate interventions. The needs of these students must not fall by the wayside in an effort to accommodate reduced budgets.

Communities will need flexibility and support in their efforts to exercise their options in serving the needs of young children. The many fine initiatives already in place demonstrate that, along with school systems, other agencies must be fiscally and morally committed to the development of young children.

Some steps CMEC could consider in supporting programs for 4- and 5-year-olds are:

- making a strong statement of support for quality educational programs for 4- and 5-year-old children and the universal availability of such programs;
- determining appropriate steps to ensure that these programs remain a stable feature of services to children;
- assisting jurisdictions in providing consistent educational services from province to province and in ensuring portability by doing the following:
 - ◆ developing common terminologies related to programs for 4- and 5-year-olds;
 - ◆ suggesting appropriate staffing ratios;
 - ◆ conducting research on the training necessary for staff of programs for 4- and 5-year-olds;
 - ◆ elaborating the means by which parents can become an integral part of the educational system;
 - ◆ developing guidelines on the advisability of and processes for moving from half-day to full-day programs;
 - ◆ encouraging all boards to have early-identification and treatment programs;
 - ◆ working with other agencies and departments to ensure that services and programs available in the preschool years continue as part of the school program.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Both within formal school systems and in preschool education, services to children must reflect the complexities of their lives. A holistic approach to preschool education requires coordination of all services to children. Coordination of the efforts of agencies serving children, the children's

families, and communities creates a synergy that will enable society to move ahead in educating young people. Some ministries of education are already engaged in partnerships to provide coordinated services in the preschool years.

Some examples of the diverse approaches to collaboration are provided by initiatives in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick.

British Columbia has established the Ministry for Children and Families, which merges various aspects of five ministries. The needs of the child is the focus of the new ministry. The ministry will serve children and youth from birth to age 19.

Saskatchewan Education has developed the Prekindergarten Program for Community Schools, intended to provide holistic and early intervention for children aged 3 and 4 at risk of school failure. Saskatchewan Education works in partnership with boards of education and community groups in carrying out these preschool programs.

In May of 1996 the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon's Guadalupe House, a spiritual centre for Aboriginal Peoples, joined the Catholic board of education in that city and developed the first preschool program for 3- and 4-year-old aboriginal children in Saskatoon. The objective was to prepare the children for an effective transition when they entered the regular school system.

The mandate of the Manitoba Children and Youth Secretariat is to initiate a coordinated and integrated system of services for children, youth, and their families. The area of early childhood has been targeted for concerted effort in order to increase the prospect for leading a productive life.

Quebec, as part of a four-pronged program to support children and families, has announced that it will move to integrate universal day care into the public school system. This will be done by creating early-childhood centres, which will provide stimulating environments for preschoolers and encourage the development of local services that respond to the needs of families.

A long-term initiative in Ontario, called Better Beginnings, Better Futures, has been funded by the ministries of Community and Social Services, Education and Training, and Health as well as the federal departments of Indian and Northern Affairs and Heritage Canada. The focus is on children up to age 8, their families, and their neighbourhoods. The program is holistic, community based, and tailored to community needs.

New Brunswick has specifically addressed the needs of children and their families from the prenatal through the kindergarten period in its Early Childhood Initiatives. The overarching goal of Early Childhood Initiatives is to improve the development of children who are at risk of delay in school readiness. The initiative combines the services of Public Health, Family and Community Social Services, Mental Health Commission, Department of Income Assistance, and Education.

Each of the positive initiatives above addresses, in one way or another, preschool education. These initiatives illustrate that the divide between preschool and school from the point of view of children and their learning is artificial and, really, nonexistent. These initiatives all illustrate that many agencies in a community must cooperate to ensure the adequate development of young children. Communities should be supported in their efforts to assist families in ensuring the best possible development of young children.

There are many barriers to collaboration which have to be circumvented and worked through. Mawhinney (1996) pointed out that collaborative initiatives were dependent on the support and strategic decisions of educational leaders and that there was a need to understand how successful collaborations are brought about.

A holistic approach to children requires the removal of artificial barriers and the collaboration of all groups serving children. To this end, CMEC should consider:

- stating their support for coordinated and integrated approaches to preschoolers and their families;
- encouraging ministries, in addition to education, to work together to provide community-based services to preschool children;
- supporting research into how successful holistic preschool education is accomplished;
- encouraging ministries of education to be involved in the coordination of preschool services to children.

LEADERSHIP ROLE OF CMEC IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Ministries of education in most provinces are involved in preschool education to some extent. Given the implications that preschool education has for the functioning of school systems and society as a whole, it is important that ministries support preschool education for children from birth through age 6. Indeed, schools may well be the most likely hub for community services for preschool children.

Ministries of education have a leadership role to play in supporting community-based integration of services. The integration of services cannot be accomplished without the involvement of schools. There are many governance issues that have to be resolved before preschool education can function smoothly in creating optimal readiness of children for formal school programs. Ministries of education are in a position to push for clarification of responsibilities among ministries and other agencies serving preschool children.

In provincial cabinets ministers of education should act as spokespersons for preschool education and urge their colleagues to ensure that coordinated efforts will enable all children to have the opportunity for success in school and in life. To this end, cooperation with ministries responsible for social services, health services, justice, and family services will be necessary. Mechanisms for

the resolution of disputes of jurisdiction and gaps in service to preschool children would be helpful.

Ministries of education have a role to play in ensuring that preschool learning is of a high quality. Toward that end, initiatives of the federal government deserve comment and support. Some of the current federal initiatives that have an impact on preschool education are the National Children's Agenda, including the Learning Readiness initiative, the National Longitudinal Survey of Children, and the National Child Benefits Program.

CMEC should take every opportunity to provide leadership through full participation in the National Children's Agenda.

The National Children's Alliance, comprised of national organizations with an interest in the well-being of children and youth, is working to identify key components of a national children's agenda. The support of CMEC is important in the alliance's call for the federal government to:

- develop comprehensive policy directions and sustainable initiatives;
- develop a social reporting process to monitor the well-being of children and youth, and track actions taken to improve child and youth outcomes;
- collaborate with all levels of government in the development of a national-policy initiative that supports voluntary-sector participation in program and policy development;
- develop an integrated, public-education campaign on children and youth issues.

Ministries of education should support the development of minimum acceptable standards of service for preschoolers. The work of the Canadian Child Care Federation, in its *National Statement on Quality Child Care*, illustrates how standards can be developed and elaborated, in this case regarding child care. Expectations regarding preschool education should be clarified, and movement toward established goals could be monitored and shared through CMEC.

Ministers of education, on the understanding that community-based initiatives are most effective for preschool children, should support and encourage their colleagues to support programs that are grounded in local communities. Ministers should support the public availability of preschool education, especially to children with special needs and children living in poverty. A variety of options and flexibility in delivery of support for preschool children will be needed. Initiatives to support the development of young children will require fiscal and moral commitment from many agencies.

In summary, ministers of education must take a key role in moving provincial governments forward in ensuring that preschool learning enables all children to take advantage of school programs. This requires that ministers go beyond their specific jurisdiction in order to influence the factors that enable children to be school ready. Bridges must be built between ministries to make preschool education work.

Ministers should encourage the broadcasting of the positive things that are happening in their province on preschool education so that others may benefit from their experiences. Specific actions that CMEC might take with regard to providing leadership on preschool education include the following:

- releasing a statement emphasizing the importance of quality preschool education and declaring CMEC's support for a variety of publicly funded, community-based programs;
- continuing support for the National Children's Agenda and moving to full-participation status;
- supporting the work of the National Children's Alliance regarding key components of a national children's agenda;
- developing a directory of best practices in preschool education with examples from each province;
- encouraging provinces to establish goals for preschool education and pledging the support of ministries of education to playing a leadership role in their development;
- reporting on the progress each province is making toward meeting the goals for preschool education and toward bridging gaps between ministries.

CONCLUSION

The fact that learning is lifelong and includes the years from birth to 6 years makes it imperative that those concerned with schools also be concerned with preschool education. Preschool programs can be carried out in a variety of settings and sponsored by a variety of agencies, depending on the needs and resources of families and communities. Quality preschool programs have been demonstrated to have long-term and lasting effects that benefit both individuals and society. The many positive initiatives now in place demonstrate the results that can be obtained by financial and moral commitment to young children on the part of many agencies working together.

Three areas where CMEC can provide support for preschool education are as follows:

- quality educational programs for 4- and 5-year-olds;
- holistic approaches to preschoolers which are coordinated and integrated;
- leadership in emphasizing the importance of publicly funded preschool programs.

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This document has been developed by the Canadian School Boards Association in partnership with the following organizations:

Assembly of First Nations programs for 4- and 5-year-olds

Canadian Association of the Deaf

Canadian Association of Principals

Canadian Association of School Administrators

Canadian Child Care Federation

Canadian Education Association

Canadian Home and School Federation

Canadian Council on Social Development

Canadian Institute of Child Health

Canadian Teachers' Federation

Human Resource Development Canada

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada