

## Hearing, Vision and Dental Screening Announcement

**Premier Gordon Campbell**

**March 3, 2005**

### *Check Against Delivery*

Thank you all for coming here today.

I've recently taken to walking around town with a basket of fruit and vegetables because I want everyone to have the right amount of fruit and vegetables every day.

The basket also represents the new program we're launching -- the school Fruit and Vegetable Snack program which we're offering to B.C. schools in conjunction with B.C. agriculture and B.C. Tree Fruit Growers. We want to make sure that no child in our province misses out on the opportunity to eat properly and snack on the foods that we know make a positive long-term effect on their overall health.

We've launched a satellite pilot program in ten schools across the province, two in each of the health districts that will move us closer toward our goal of being the healthiest, fittest jurisdiction in the world.

It's a bit of a fight -- I was at the Northern Winter Games and one of the hockey players tapped me on the shoulder just as we were leaving and said: "Do you think you could reinstate some of the junk food back into my school?" I had to do something we don't like to do; I had to say: "No, we won't be doing that." But it is encouraging to know that we will be providing better choices instead -- fresh fruit and vegetables direct from B.C. farms. B.C.'s children living healthy and productive lives is a vision we all share, a vision this government is excited to be a part of.

I am really pleased to be here today. There are lots of challenges when you get the opportunity to serve in elected office. But there are some days, like today, when you can make a decision that you know will have a long-term positive and pretty exceptional impact on the lives of citizens.

I'm joined by two ministers who have worked tirelessly on behalf of our young people in the province. The Minister of State for Early Childhood Development, Linda Reid, is with me today. Linda, thank you for coming. Also, the Minister of

Health Services, Shirley Bond. As you know, Shirley was a school board chair prior to running for public office and being elected provincially. She's been our Minister of Advanced Education and now is our Minister of Health Services. She has been an enthusiastic and dedicated advocate for children across the province as well.

Susan Brice, Minister of Human Resources, sends her apologies for not being here today.

All three of these women have worked incredibly hard to put together comprehensive programs to provide children with not just the tools for a preventative approach to their health, such as the appropriate physical activity resources, but to install programs that make the best health services available to every child in every corner of the province. These women have the support of the entire provincial government on this one and for that I would like to thank every public servant and official for making it possible for Linda and Shirley and Susan to do their jobs in the most effective way.

There are approximately a quarter of a million British Columbians are under the age of six right now. We want to ensure these children have not just access to great health care but that we provide them with preventative programs; early detection of potential challenges to their health means that ultimately our kids can spend more time being kids and less time in the health care system.

What we know today we have actually known for a long time. In the past, institutional barriers were created that prevented us from acting and being proactive about things that we know improve children's lives. Today I am pleased to say that we are going to tear down a few of those barriers.

Let me tell you some things we know for certain: Undiagnosed vision and hearing impairments, undiagnosed dental problems have a lifelong impact on people's lives. Young children -- and by young I mean from newborns on -- cannot be effective advocates for their health because they lack not only the communication skills, but also the perception to know that their life could be different. A child with weak eyes might think that is just how everybody sees. Or, in the case of an older child, he or she might feel pressured into silence because they don't want to be the only one wearing glasses on the playground.

Over the next three years we are launching a comprehensive early-screening program aimed at diagnosing health challenges in children because the sooner we can diagnose those challenges the better.

The province will invest \$73 million to provide universal hearing, dental and vision testing for every child in the province of British Columbia under the age of six years old. This is the first program of this scope and magnitude ever launched in the province. It has three components, and each of them is important. First, there'll be \$19 million over the next three years to help systematically diagnose preschool children with vision impairments.

When I was in school I remember one of the things that happened to me. For some reason I kept getting moved closer and closer to the front of the class. It wasn't because I was the smartest guy in the class and it wasn't because I was talking too much. It was because I have a pretty significant visual challenge. In fact, if I take these off I can't even see you guys. But I went years at school before getting the proper medical treatment.

By diagnosing visual challenges early on for children we actually increase their ability to pursue their goals and their objectives. We increase their self-confidence and esteem. Children must be tested so that we can ensure treatment for those who need it. We are going to be providing public health checks for every child in B.C. at the ages of 6 months, 12 months and 18 months at regional health authority child care centers across the province.

We want to ensure parents and educators have the information they need on children's eye health and vision so they can support their children. We're confident that by increasing our efforts at the diagnostic and support levels that we are, in fact, increasing their opportunities for lifelong experiences of adventure and learning and excitement in the communities they live in.

We will be increasing the coverage for prescription eyeglasses for children from low-income and income-assisted families because we want every child in British Columbia to have the opportunity to see the chalkboard from wherever they sit in the classroom and to be able to see the ball coming from way down field.

The dental health of our children is another critical component of this program, one that sometimes gets overlooked when we consider the overall health of our children. We will be providing over \$35 million in dental screening and support programs over the next three years. That dental screening will include infants

who have risk of early childhood cavities, and every child in the province at the ages of five and six.

A preventative educational campaign in concert with the B.C. Dental Association to inform parents and caregivers on childhood dental decay will be a critical part of this program. The Minister of Health Services and the UBC Faculty of Dentistry will fund five dental community residencies for high-needs communities with limited access to dental services. In addition, funding for a partnership between the Provincial Health Services Association and Children's and Women's Hospital will be provided to treat children born with severe genetic conditions like cleft palates.

Increased dental coverage will also be provided for children of low-income and income-assisted families because it is again critical that every child in B.C. gets the same opportunity and treatment by our health care system and programs.

Lastly, there will be \$19 million for hearing screening at the ages of one month, three months and at six months to make sure that children are being diagnosed as early as possible with regard to hearing impairment.

Every year in British Columbia about 120 babies are born with hearing challenges. Until now there hasn't been a province wide screening program for infants born with hearing loss or impairments. Today we're launching the Sound Start program. It's a new program to provide early screening diagnosis and treatment for hearing impairment. It's a critical collaboration between doctors, families, communities, UBC and the Children's and Women's Health Centre.

Newborn screening will detect about 95 percent of infants with hearing loss at birth. They will also be checked for risk factors and if those risk factors could lead to hearing loss later on, those children will be re-checked on a monthly basis to determine if there has been any change in their hearing abilities.

Hearing tests will be regularly applied for the first three years of the child's life. If and when a child needs additional assistance, we will provide it. For those who experience hearing loss, the Provincial Health Services Association will set up a central hearing aid resource so families can fit their children with hearing devices.

I think for all of us who are not challenged by hearing loss we should recognize how important that sense is. Hearing is how we develop our language skills.

Hearing is how we develop our interactive skills with those who are living with us, whether it's our family or our relations in our community. So this is going to have a huge impact on the quality of children's lives in British Columbia.

Let me say on behalf of my colleagues how much I appreciate the time and effort that's been put into making this program a reality today by the professionals we have and the provincial Health Services ministry; by the doctors and community resource people across the province who were willing to step up and help us meet this challenge, and most importantly to all the parents who are going to make sure that this works on behalf of their kids.

With professionals and parents working together we have now put in place the resources we need to so that we can say with confidence that every child in British Columbia under the age of six years old are going to get the hearing, vision and dental checkups and support that they need so they can have a top-quality life in this great province.

Thank you very much.