

April 8, 2021

The Honourable Chrystia Freeland
The Honourable Jean-Yves Duclos
The Honourable Mona Fortier
The Honourable Ahmed Hussen
The Honourable Catherine McKenna
The Honourable Marc Miller
The Honourable Maryam Monsef
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada
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Dear Ministers:

EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE: A PUBLIC GOOD
Time to address the Canada-wide emergency

As the Childcare and Early Childhood Education Advisory Group of [The Prosperity Project](#), we continue to sound the alarm about the crisis in childcare that is threatening the future of the economy and the women who work in it. We have collaborated with a number of experts in the field of early learning and childcare (“ELCC”), including Jane Bertrand and Margaret McCain (Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation), Kerry McCuaig (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education), Dr. Kate Bezanson (Associate Dean - Brock University) and Monica Lysack (Sheridan College) who have all researched and written extensively on these topics. As a result, we are reaching out again to call for the introduction of a Canada-wide ELCC system to address the needs of working families in a way that will strengthen our social fabric, expand our economic prosperity and be sustainable for decades to come.

Background:

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought no shortage of heartbreak: thousands of lives lost, businesses hobbled and life plans interrupted. And while we often say that ‘we are all in this together’, many of the hardships of the crisis have been unevenly shared. In the world of work, we have witnessed significant negative consequences for women.

Dozens of research pieces have called out the exponential share of women exiting the workforce due to the pressures of the pandemic. Other reports abound with stories of childcare centres that are closing due to lack of resources. At the same time, the disproportionate mental health effects of the COVID crisis on women and children are now coming to light. These trends - if not reversed - could see millions of women lose their good health and access to fair employment, threatening almost three decades of progress. Similarly, we risk the health and development of an entire generation of young children when they lack adequate care and educational support during their early years.

While this is very disquieting news, the underlying conditions that created these outcomes are not new at all. For decades, families have struggled to integrate the pressures of paid work and child rearing

through a patchwork of scarce, confusing and often expensive childcare offerings. The pandemic has made those formerly private struggles visible on a massive scale, exposing a chasm in Canada's social fabric that can no longer be ignored.

The time has come to view the absence of universal, affordable, accessible and high quality early childhood education and care as the Canada-wide emergency that it is - *and* to get on with the business of fixing it.

Strong economic recovery - a Canadian imperative:

A strong economic growth strategy is essential to Canada's recovery from the pandemic and to ensure more prosperous years ahead.

In the short term, a national approach to early learning and childcare ("ELCC") will be indispensable to returning women (and men) to their workplaces and keeping them there, hopefully in even greater numbers than before the crisis. Over the long-term, the resulting increases in workforce participation and productivity will be a huge boost to Canada's post-pandemic economic recovery and will help us build a more inclusive Canada for all.

In addition, a strong commitment to quality and equity in ELCC will provide young children with a foundation for academic success that will enhance their lifelong productivity and prosperity. It will also help to establish and to grow programs that allow them to catch up on the lost developmental opportunities during the pandemic.

Building children's infrastructure - a long range plan:

The Canadian reality is that ELCC - as with most areas of social policy - must be a negotiated collaboration among the federal, provincial and territorial governments. However, it cannot be accomplished within the structure of the current childcare market.

Creating a new and sustainable system requires a shift in both policy and perspective where we come to view ELCC as a public good - the first tier of public care and education - linked to and just as important as the elementary to postsecondary tiers that follow.

Overall, The Prosperity Project is supportive of a new ELCC platform for children and families across the country that benefits from the attributes described below.

1. Shared guiding principles must be affirmed for ELCC services in all jurisdictions focused on issues of quality, accessibility, and affordability. These principles will ensure a right of access for all children regardless of their parents' work status or income levels, while at the same time allowing for regional and local adaptation.

2. Long-term, stable, national funding must be made available to "fund the services" in amounts that are i) sufficient to meet the standards of the guiding principles, and ii) secure and predictable enough to permit the long-term planning and sustainability of the programs. These funds will ensure the training, recruitment and retention of well-paid and professional staff, offering attractive career prospects for early childhood educators - a predominantly female labour force. Funding must also attend to building and retrofitting spaces for centres, which has the benefit of stimulating traditionally male employment.

3. Ongoing benchmarking, assessment and planning must be established and maintained to ensure public planning and management of supply, monitor outcomes across ELCC programs, ensure adherence to the guiding principles and facilitate continuous quality improvement.

4. First Nations, Inuit and Métis children are often not meeting the minimum indices of social determinants of health, with no access to ELCC programming at all. They and their families must be provided with the resources necessary to ensure equitable access to high quality and culturally appropriate ELCC programs.

Canada is starting from a good place on this journey and can build on the progress it has made through the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care and the accompanying bilateral agreements that have been negotiated with every province and territory, as well as with the First Nation, Inuit and Métis Peoples.

That said, there is no question that these are ambitious plans requiring investment in the many billions of dollars. But we know from study after study that higher workforce participation rates and significantly improved health and wellbeing outcomes for children more than justify the cost. It is not only the smart thing to do, it is the right thing to do - and it is the Canadian thing to do.

As *Children First Canada* reminds us often, although kids and youth are only 20% of our population, they are 100% of our future. The architecture of the proposed Canada-wide ELCC programs will get working families the resources they need to be productive and prosperous and ensure that we are making the right investments for the future of our children.

Conclusion:

The road to recovery from COVID-19 will not be easy; but if we establish the right foundations - with proper support for our youngest citizens and their families - we can rebuild a world of work for women (and men) that is fairer, more accessible and more sustainable for decades to come.

Remember, we can't get to work without roads, bridges, trains and buses - what we traditionally call 'infrastructure'. We also can't get to work if our youngest children are not properly cared for. For the sake of our families, let's start calling that infrastructure too.

Your sincerely,

- Pamela Jeffery, Founder, The Prosperity Project
- Sara L. Austin, Founder and CEO, Children First Canada
- Cathy Bennett, Corporate Director and former Newfoundland and Labrador Minister of Finance and Minister Responsible for the Status of Women
- Christiane Bergevin, President, Bergevin Capital and Corporate Director
- Jane Bertrand, Program Director, Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation

- Dr. Kate Bezanson, Associate Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, Sociology, Brock University
- Heather Munroe -Blum, Corporate Director and Principal Emerita, McGill University
- Laurel Broten, President & CEO, Nova Scotia Business and former Ontario Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, Children, Youth Services and Education
- Penny Collette, Adjunct professor, University of Ottawa and former Director of Appointments, Prime Minister's Office
- Janet Ecker, Corporate Director and former Ontario Minister of Finance
- Anne Marie Hubert, Executive Leader and Board member
- Goldy Hyder, President and Chief Executive Officer, Business Council of Canada
- Roberta Jamieson, Corporate Director and former CEO of Indspire
- Monica Lysack, Policy Consultant and Professor, Early Childhood Leadership, Sheridan College
- Margaret McCain, Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation
- Margaret McCuaig-Boyd, McCuaig Boyd Consulting and former Alberta Minister of Energy
- Kerlande Mibel, President and Founder, International Black Economic Forum
- Kathleen Taylor, Chair of Altas Partners and Chair of the Board of Royal Bank of Canada

cc: The Honourable Erin O'Toole
Mr. Jagmeet Singh
M. Yves-François Blanchet
Ms. Elizabeth May
Ms. Annamie Paul