



**REPORT TO:** Co-Chairs and Members of Public Health and  
Social Services Committee

**SUBJECT:** The State of Canada's Early Learning and Care System

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## **RECOMMENDATION**

That this Committee recommend to Regional Council that this report be received for information.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- A UNICEF report released in December 2008, "*The child care transition, Innocenti Report Card 8*" on early childhood care and education ranked Canada last among 25 developed nations
- Canada met only one of the 10 benchmarks of quality and access proposed in the report as the minimum standard for protecting the rights of children in the early years
- The UNICEF report reinforces that early childhood care and education has huge potential to enhance children's well-being and development with significant long-term social and economic returns
- The report has continued to garner attention in the Canadian press advocating the federal government to invest in early childhood services for both short economic stimulus and long term economic prosperity

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications directly associated with this report.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this report is to provide Committee and Council with an overview of Canada's early learning and care system as compared to other nations and underline the importance of continuing to advocate for a federally led, publically funded, sustainable early learning and care system.

## **BACKGROUND**

The UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre was established in 1988 to strengthen the research capability of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and to support its advocacy for children worldwide. UNICEF's prime objectives are to improve international understanding of issues relating to children's rights and to help facilitate the full implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in both industrialized and developing countries.

The December 2008 report, "*The child care transition, Innocenti Report Card 8*" complements research presented in earlier reports concerned with monitoring different aspects of child well-being and of child poverty in rich countries. The Report Card series presents "league tables" on aspects of child well-being in the world's most advanced economies, countries that are members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) seeking to stimulate debates through comparison of what has actually been achieved by one or more countries.

In addition to ranking countries on 10 benchmarks of quality and access, the UNICEF report refers to a great change coming over childhood in the world's richest countries where the majority of children are spending their childhood in some form of out-of-home child care while reinforcing the neuroscientific research that underlines the importance of the early years in every aspect of a child's development.

## **REPORT**

The UNICEF Report Card on early childhood care and education compared 25 OECD countries on 10 benchmarks that represent a practical and attainable set of minimum standards for protecting the rights of children in their most vulnerable and formative years. Together with Ireland, Canada ranked last among affluent countries meeting only one of the benchmarks assessing quality and access: 50% of staff in accredited early-education services have proper post-secondary qualifications. Sweden was the only country to meet all 10 standards. United States met 3. Slovenia, the only non-OECD country assessed met 6.

It is important to note that the benchmarks represent a basic minimum standard rather than a guarantee of high quality early childhood services. They relate primarily to out-of-home, centre based child care, do not take into account other significant social services and programs targeting at-risk children, nor do they measure parental involvement in early childhood services. Of most importance, they are directed towards what governments can do to ensure that the child care transition is *managed in the best interests of both children and their societies' future*.

The 10 benchmarks, or minimum standards for quality and access, proposed in the UNICEF report are as follows:

- Parental leave of one year at 50% of salary
- A national plan with priority for disadvantaged children
- Subsidized and regulated child care services for 25% of children under 3
- Subsidized and accredited early education services for 80% of 4 year olds
- 80% of child care staff trained
- 50% of staff in accredited early education services tertiary educated with relevant qualifications
- Minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education
- 1% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) spent on early childhood services
- Child poverty rate less than 10%
- Near-universal outreach of essential child health services

Figure 1 Early childhood services – a league table (see Appendix 1) provides a comparison of early childhood services in the 25 OECD countries studied in the report.

A notable difference between Canada and countries who were rated at the top, is that early years and the child care transition is facilitated by public policy and are viewed as a critical investment opportunity not only for school success but also for society and citizenship. As well, the report suggests that many OECD countries need to significantly increase current levels of expenditure on early childhood services. Canada spends approximately 0.2% of GDP on child care supports - far below the report's recommended 1%. Canada remains one of the few highly developed industrialized countries that does not have a federally led, publicly funded, sustainable early learning and care system.

Quality child care allows parents and those that care for their children the ability to participate in the workforce. Public investment in child care is a key strategy for responding to immediate economic challenges by stimulating job creation, labour force participation particularly for female, single parents, and generates government tax revenue - all which are critical to economic prosperity. Early childhood education and care has a huge potential to enhance child well-being and development with significant long-term social and economic return. Studies have suggested that the returns, mainly in the form of reduced crime rate, services aimed at family poverty and social assistance, amount to approximately \$7 to \$8 for every \$1 invested.

### *A Local Perspective*

Considering the UNICEF report and Canada's ranking, Niagara has shown leadership on a number of initiatives related to early childhood care and education:

- Niagara Children's Charter adopted and endorsed by articulating a vision for the children of Niagara, based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – demonstrating the commitment of the Niagara community to the well-being of Niagara's children;

- Voluntary participation of over 90% of Niagara Early Childhood Educators in Quality Child Care Niagara (QCCN) Phase 1 training and the on-going development and implementation of QCCN Phases 2 and 3;
- Expansion of licensed child care under Best Start of 679 spaces exceeding the Ministry of Children and Youth Services' target of 553 spaces; and
- Niagara Region Council reinvestment of \$1.5 million as noted in COM 53-2008 (September 16, 2008) "Increasing Prosperity for Niagara Families Living in Poverty".

The leadership demonstrated by the Province with Best Start, its commitment to Full Day Learning for 4 and 5 year olds expected to be announced in Spring 2009, the recent *Breaking the Cycle, Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy* and the establishment of the College of Early Childhood Educators are initiatives on which to build a quality early childhood care and education system worthy of the best nations.

Commitment and leadership at the federal, provincial and local levels is required for Canada to embark on a bold vision for a comprehensive, universal, publically funded early childhood education and care system in order to ensure healthy child development for our youngest citizens and long term economic prosperity.

Submitted by:

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Appendix 1 - Fig. 1 Early childhood services – a league table

**Fig. 1 Early childhood services – a league table**

This *Report Card* discusses the opportunities and risks involved in the child care transition, and proposes internationally applicable benchmarks for early childhood care and education – a set of minimum standards for protecting the rights of children in their most vulnerable and formative years.

The table below shows which countries are currently meeting the suggested standards, and summarizes this first attempt to evaluate and compare early childhood services in the 25 OECD countries in which data have been collected.

Benchmark		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Number of benchmarks achieved										
	Parental leave of 1 year at 50% of salary										
	A national plan with priority for disadvantaged children										
	Subsidized and regulated child care services for 25% of children under 3										
	Subsidized and accredited early education services for 80% of 4 year-olds										
	80% of all child care staff trained										
	50% of staff in accredited early education services tertiary educated with relevant qualification										
	Minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education										
	1.0% of GDP spent on early childhood services										
	Child poverty rate less than 10%										
	Near-universal outreach of essential child health services										
Sweden	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Iceland	9		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Denmark	8	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Finland	8	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
France	8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Norway	8	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Belgium (Flanders)	6		✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓
Hungary	6		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
New Zealand	6		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Slovenia	6	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓
Austria	5		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Netherlands	5		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
United Kingdom*	5		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			
Germany	4		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		
Italy	4		✓		✓	✓	✓				
Japan	4		✓		✓	✓	✓				✓
Portugal	4		✓		✓	✓	✓				
Republic of Korea	4		✓		✓	✓	✓				✓
Mexico	3		✓			✓	✓				
Spain	3				✓	✓	✓				
Switzerland	3					✓		✓		✓	
United States	3			✓			✓	✓			
Australia	2			✓			✓				
Canada	1						✓				
Ireland	1						✓				
Total benchmarks met	126	6	19	13	15	17	20	12	6	10	8

\*Data for the United Kingdom refer to England only.