

---

## **School-aged Children across Canada: A Patchwork of Public Policies**

**Rianne Mahon and Caroline Beauvais**

The commitment to develop a National Children's Agenda reflects a recognition that federal, provincial and territorial governments need to work together to support the families and local communities that form the primary nests in which children grow and develop. Important steps are being taken by these governments to support early childhood development, but the effort cannot stop there. The achievement of positive outcomes for all of Canada's children requires a sustained public commitment through all stages of development. This study focuses on children in the school-aged years. It finds that children of this age group are receiving public support, especially through the school system, but that more could be done to ensure that children everywhere in Canada have the chance to thrive.

Most provinces are investing substantially in curriculum reform and there have been important changes in the way schools are governed and financed. All school systems are grappling with ways to meet the diverse and special needs of school-aged children and, in some provinces, real efforts have been made to make the school the centre for delivery of a broad range of services for children and their families. Nevertheless, a decade of fiscal austerity has exacted a toll, not only on extracurricular activities but also on the pace and direction of curriculum development itself.

Children's opportunities for the safe and secure development of their full potential require more than a favourable school environment, however. Accordingly, the study examined developments in economic security, health policy, recreation and culture, child protection and justice. On the whole, the specific needs of school-aged children tend to be recognized in provinces that have developed broad children's strategies, which recognize that the benefits of early intervention are easily lost if children do not continue to get the supports they need as they mature. Where such broad strategies do not exist, the research found a tendency to focus on early child development at the expense of later years, a result particularly marked in some fields and certain provinces.

There has also been a move away from comprehensive policies (a judicious blend of general supports, supplemented by additional measures for those needing extra support) toward targeted programs. This is one of the features of the National Child Benefit, which invests most heavily in low-income families, and it is also a trend in recreation and culture, where diminishing funds are

increasingly being aimed at those children considered most "at risk." All provinces, moreover, have combined targeting with an emphasis on getting parents off social assistance and into the labour force. The existence of the complex needs of families struggling with poverty and unemployment should certainly be recognized. Yet special measures work best when they are designed to supplement strong, broad-based programs.

Two prominent themes that cut across policy fields and differences in provincial strategies were an increased emphasis on *prevention* and the importance of increased *integration* in the planning and delivery of services for school-aged children. Prevention is an especially strong concern in health-related matters. Here, schools as well as recreation and cultural programs are assigned a prominent role. Prevention is also a major theme of child protection reforms, where more emphasis is being placed on fostering good parenting. There remain, however, visible differences in the degree of investment in prevention, and in understandings of the best way to avoid negative outcomes. This is nowhere more apparent than in the area of juvenile justice. In some provinces, the emphasis is on deterrence through the imposition of strict measures on offending youths (and their parents), while, in others, the emphasis is on education and community action.

All the provinces are also engaged in efforts to "break down the silos," encouraging cooperation across disciplines and departmental mandates. In some provinces, these efforts remain modest in scope. Not surprisingly, integration is being most systematically pursued in provinces that have adopted a broad children's strategy. In Quebec and the western provinces, for example, such strategies focus specifically on children and youth. In Newfoundland, however, the focus has been on social development in general, but integrated programs, focused on children and youth, are being developed under this mantle. "Breaking down the silos" can also involve the development of new forms of partnership between governments and the private sector. In some provinces, government continues to provide financial support, but, in others, government encouragement of private (corporate and personal) donations substitutes for tax-financed programs. These new partnerships often form part of a broader move to enhance citizen participation. In some provinces, these include special efforts to give youth a voice in policies and programs that concern them. For younger children, additional measures are often necessary, however. This is why a number of provinces have introduced special ombudsmen or "children's advocates."

A final theme running through policies for school-aged children is the importance of providing culturally appropriate services. To some extent, this has meant developing programs suitable for an increasingly multicultural population. The main concern, however, is to provide more effective services for Aboriginal children and youth, and it is increasingly recognized that this requires the working out of new relationships with Aboriginal communities. One example of this is the National Aboriginal Youth strategy, which embraces all the policy areas we have examined, from education and culture to health, child protection and youth justice. Again, however, there are marked differences in the extent and form of commitment across governments.

The policies we have examined go some of the way toward addressing these challenges, albeit in quite different ways. The patchwork of policies has yet to form a solid quilt. Thus far policies for school-aged children have only been stitched together piecemeal and cannot be said to provide children aged 6 to 15 the security they need to develop and grow to their full potential.

(March 15, 2001)