School-Aged Children Need Better Support – Study

March 15, 2001 – Achieving positive outcomes for *all* of Canada's children requires a sustained public commitment through all ages and stages of development, and not just the early years.

Under the National Children's Agenda, Canada's governments are taking steps to support early childhood development. But these important initiatives and investments risk being undermined if they are not matched by measures to support the subsequent stages of children's development.

A new study from CPRN examines public policies in place for school-aged children and their families across Canada with an eye to assessing the adequacy of that support.

School-Aged Children across Canada: A Patchwork of Public Policies is written by Rianne Mahon, Professor at the School of Public Administration and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University. Included are detailed policy inventories prepared by Family Network Researcher, Caroline Beauvais, documenting initiatives affecting school-aged children, federally and in all 10 provinces. The study promises to be an essential reference for policy analysts, researchers, journalists and students.

"We found that children aged 6 to 15 are receiving public support, especially through the school system, but that support is uneven," says Mahon. "More must be done to ensure that children everywhere in Canada have the chance to thrive."

Curriculum reform, new forms of school governance and financing, and efforts to make the school the centre for delivery of a broad range of social services for children and families, are indicative of provincial concern, but these programs have suffered from years of austerity. And Mahon argues that safe and secure development of children's full potential requires more than a favourable school environment.

For this reason, the study examines developments in economic security, health policy, recreation and culture, child protection and justice for their impact on school-aged children.

While there are differences in policies and philosophy from province to province, Mahon finds a number of common themes;

- a focus on *prevention*
- all are trying to *integrate service* delivery and "to break down the silos"
- growing emphasis on *local responsibility*
- recognition of the importance of *culturally appropriate* services

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However, fiscal pressures over the past two decades have also resulted in a move away from comprehensive policies towards targeted programs, and that shift has its price.

"Families are feeling the strain," says Mahon. "With inadequate social support for things like after-school care and recreation and cultural activities, they're forced to pick up the slack. And that, of course, has other negative consequences."

According to the Director of the Family Network, Jane Jenson, special measures work best if they are designed to supplement strong broad-based programs.

"Provinces that have developed broad children's strategies, recognizing that the benefits of early intervention can be lost if children do not continue to get the support they need as they mature, are the ones who recognize the specific needs of this age group," says Jenson. "This research underlines the importance of comprehensive policies that blend general support for all children with additional measures for those in special need."

The current study outlines many initiatives designed to meet the needs of school-aged children, but it also uncovers inconsistencies and inequity.

"What we have is truly a patchwork of policies," says CPRN's President Judith Maxwell. "There are many gaps to fill before we can call this patchwork a quilt, one that provides all children in this age group with the security they need to develop and grow to their full potential."

You can access or download a copy of the document by clicking here.

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