

A smarter way to invest in children

Marcel Lauzière and Colette Murphy

Eight charitable organizations have come together to urge the federal government to ramp up investment in early childhood education.

The federal government has a problem. Federal Employment Minister Pierre Poilievre recently said in a [CBC interview](#) that around 200,000 families are not registered for the Universal Child Care Benefit even though they're eligible. It seems many people simply don't know about a program that gives a family with two children under six about \$4,000 a year to offset child care costs.

The solution to this problem is probably not better outreach or a simplified registration process. It's more likely to be an entirely different approach to supporting young children and their families. At least that's what more than 150 Canadian scholars would advise anyone in government and anyone who is standing as a candidate for public office this fall. They would point everyone to the overwhelming evidence that universal early childhood education (ECE) is one of the smartest investments Canada can make.

These leading academics from psychology, education, medicine, economics, neuroscience and other fields issued a statement earlier this year. Their unequivocal support for quality, publicly funded, early childhood education has inspired leaders in other sectors, including a group of [eight charitable foundations](#), to do the same.

We are investors in a wide range of programs and services for children and their families with roots in communities as diverse as we are. We've come together to urge Canada's politicians to recognize that early childhood education is a must-have element in building a more prosperous country.

Our case for public investment cites these significant social and economic returns:

- Improved language, literacy and math skills — children who attend high quality preschool are 2.4 times more likely in English and 3.4 times more likely in mathematics to attain the highest grade at age 11.
- Greater likelihood of school success — a 20 per cent higher rate of on-time school graduation for students from low socio-economic status.
- Increased opportunities for parents and caregivers, particularly women, in the labour force — in Quebec maternal labour force participation went from Canada's lowest to highest due to the introduction of low cost child care.
- A more level playing field for children growing up in low-income communities and other inequitable circumstances. While ECE does not eradicate differences for children living in disadvantaged circumstances it does narrow the

achievement gap: 20 per cent higher rates of on-time graduation, 20 per cent higher employment rate, 10 per cent higher earnings, and 22 per cent less involvement with the criminal justice system at age 40 compared to children living in disadvantaged circumstances who did not attend preschool

Research from the OECD and leading academic institutions in Canada, the U.S. and other jurisdictions underpin our case for public investment.

The Lawson Foundation and the Atkinson Foundation are two of the eight voices calling for a more comprehensive, Canada-wide approach to early childhood education today. We're encouraged by the progress made on this front in every province and territory in recent years. While the pace of change has been different in each jurisdiction, we have seen increased access, better governance, improved quality and greater funding overall. This base of experience, and the evidence behind it, has created a path for all of us to follow.

It's time for the federal government to become a full partner in this historic effort — to move Canada up from 0.6 per cent of GDP to the OECD average of 1.1 per cent for public spending on early childhood education. It's time for all federal parties to take a stand, to commit to supporting high-quality ECE for children wherever they live in this country. It's time for everyone who has a vote to do their homework and make a decision that is in the best interest of those who don't have a voice — our children.

Marcel Lauzière is president & CEO of the Lawson Foundation. ***Colette Murphy*** is the executive director of the Atkinson Foundation