

CANADA'S  
PUBLIC POLICY

**FORUM**

DES POLITIQUES PUBLIQUES  
DU CANADA

BUILDING LEADERS  
Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities

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Halifax Roundtable Summary  
February 2015



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PUBLIC POLICY

# FORUM

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DU CANADA

The Public Policy Forum is an independent, not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of government in Canada through enhanced dialogue among the public, private and voluntary sectors. The Forum's members, drawn from business, federal, provincial and territorial governments, the voluntary sector and organized labour, share a belief that an efficient and effective public service is important in ensuring Canada's competitiveness abroad and quality of life at home.

Established in 1987, the Forum has earned a reputation as a trusted, nonpartisan facilitator, capable of bringing together a wide range of stakeholders in productive dialogue. Its research program provides a neutral base to inform collective decision making. By promoting information sharing and greater links between governments and other sectors, the Forum helps ensure public policy in our country is dynamic, coordinated and responsive to future challenges and opportunities.

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2014, Canada's Public Policy Forum launched *Building Leaders: Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities*, a national initiative to advance early childhood development (ECD) in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. As part of this project, the Forum is convening a series of multi-sector roundtables across the country to explore opportunities for enhancing the outcomes of ECD programs in Indigenous communities.

On January 22, 2015, the Forum convened a roundtable in Halifax. Hosted by Dalhousie University, this invitation-only event brought together a small group of ECD practitioners, policymakers, academics, and community leaders to share best practices, key challenges, and new avenues for greater impact.

## Current Practices

With representation from across Atlantic Canada, the roundtable provided insights into the state of ECD programming in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. The discussion focused on ECD programs in the context of the broader health needs of Aboriginal families and their children and highlighted systemic barriers that undermine access to ECD programs and services. The recent integration of ECD programs and services into provincial Departments of Education has required a re-think of ECD program mandates and, in some cases, a review of program resources. Some participants expressed a general concern that service integration could result in reduced resources for ECD programming and diminished responsiveness to the specific needs of Aboriginal children and their families. Others are optimistic that the integration of ECD and education programs may, over time, create more opportunities for policy-makers and funders to engage with First Nations communities.

### ***Nova Scotia***

Nova Scotia is currently integrating ECD programming into the Department of Education and developing common child assessment tools. Some roundtable participants worry that the desire to develop a 'curriculum' for young children will minimize the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the healthy development of Aboriginal children, resulting in generic assessments that may not be based on culturally appropriate milestones. A recent program review conducted by the Province has also led to a significant increase in funding for early identification of children and families at risk. However, as the proportion of young children referred to additional health and learning support grows, services may not be able to meet the increased demand.

### ***Newfoundland and Labrador***

In October 2014, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador announced the integration of ECD and education programs, which reflected a recognition of the significance of the early years for healthy child development. The Government has also announced the implementation of full-day kindergarten in 2016.

### ***New Brunswick***

New Brunswick created the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in 2011. ECD practitioners are working with the new Department to position learning as a continuum stretching from birth to age 21, and they are encouraging collaboration with other departments that play a role in this continuum. Access to ECD programs and supports varies considerably across First Nations communities in New Brunswick, with some communities receiving minimal ECD services. Participants proposed that

the provincial government develop an overall snapshot of the distribution of ECD needs and resources in Aboriginal communities in order to determine where incremental investment would yield the greatest benefit.

### ***Prince Edward Island***

Prince Edward Island merged ECD programs into the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in 2008. The Department provides a curriculum framework to Early Years Centres and assigns an Early Childhood Coach, as well as the support of an Early Childhood Specialist and Early Literacy Specialist, to mentor educators in the implementation and adaptation of that framework to particular environments. In addition, the provincial government funds multi-disciplinary child development teams to provide support to vulnerable families and children.

## **Key Issues and Considerations**

The integration of ECD and education programs across the Atlantic region reflects a recognition by policy-makers of the significance of early childhood experiences for successful life outcomes. At the same time, chronic underfunding and low levels of remuneration for ECD program providers have made the recruitment and retention of qualified staff an ongoing challenge. The lack of capital funding to replace aging infrastructure, particularly buildings on-reserve, has undermined the quality of programs and generated health and safety concerns in some communities. Although provincial governments are prepared to license on-reserve child care facilities upon request, many on-reserve child care programs lack the capital funding and ongoing operating resources to meet provincial licensing requirements. Some participants observed that on-reserve child care programs appear to have been designed to fail.

Aboriginal families remain disadvantaged by program barriers that may impact their decision to raise their children on or off-reserve. Access to services is a particular challenge for Aboriginal children with special needs. However, ECD programs that incorporate Aboriginal culture and languages demonstrate high levels of participation by families and achieve consistently strong outcomes.

### ***Access to holistic programs and supports***

As ECD programs and services transition to Departments of Education, there is concern that program priorities will focus on formal education, omitting supports for mental health and social/emotional development. The social determinants of health for Aboriginal populations also include cultural identity and the legacy of colonialism, which should be reflected in the design of ECD programs for Aboriginal families and children.

Supporting children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is particularly challenging. Some governments continue to frame FASD as an “Aboriginal” problem, despite the significant prevalence of FASD in the non-Aboriginal population. At the same time, Aboriginal communities receive only a fraction of the total public funding available to support families affected by FASD. For example, participants estimated that, across the Atlantic region, only one-third of reserve communities have access to FASD supports. Beyond ECD programming, participants noted a chronic lack of teacher training and other supports for the integration of children with FASD into the primary and secondary school system. Moreover, children who have received appropriate FASD supports in the early years may lose these supports as they transition to school.

Roundtable participants also highlighted an integrated model for ECD programming that is being piloted by selected communities in the Atlantic region. Funded by the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation, this model provides intensive support to the entire population of children in ECD and school settings without the prior diagnosis or labelling of particular children as having “special” needs. As this approach has demonstrated robust outcomes, the Jimmy Pratt Foundation is currently working to secure implementation of the model in Newfoundland and Labrador.

### ***Culture and language***

The roundtable included a discussion of the importance of incorporating Aboriginal culture and worldviews into the design and use of assessment tools in ECD programs. One participant conveyed an anecdote of a young child in a remote community who was asked to name objects in a photograph as a means of assessing language development. The child was unfamiliar with the objects and, therefore, unable to name them. Participants emphasized the value of creating culturally appropriate ECD environments for young Aboriginal children. While some provinces and the Public Health Agency of Canada provide training in cultural competence for ECD program practitioners, respect for cultural safety may not be reflected in program design.

### ***Jurisdictional barriers***

The division of responsibility between the federal and provincial governments creates significant differences in the availability of programs on and off-reserve, especially those targeting families and children with special needs. Families that require these programs may be forced to move off-reserve to access them.

There appears to be a lack of effective engagement and collaboration between the various government organizations responsible for ECD program funding and the leaders of the impacted Aboriginal communities. While provincial governments have established mechanisms for engaging First Nations communities in primary and secondary education issues, similar mechanisms do not exist for discussion of ECD challenges on-reserve, which are seen as solely within federal jurisdiction.

Participants reflected on what would be necessary to devolve control of ECD and other health programs to First Nations communities. First Nations’ control of ECD programming would support culturally-safe programming, allow for the use of appropriate assessment tools, empower the community through employment and family engagement, and reallocate resources previously devoted to managing overlapping program requirements.

Finally, some participants noted that, in the absence of a national strategy on early childhood development, philanthropic foundations are playing an increasing role in supporting pilot demonstrations and disseminating best practices in ECD programming. Although this approach has had some notable successes, participants expressed concern that it is not a sustainable strategy for maintaining ECD programs, especially in high-need communities.

## **Future Action**

In the spring of 2015, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal is expected to rule on key issues in the domain of First Nations child welfare. Many hope that this ruling will focus attention on the relationship between the pervasive poverty experienced by First Nation communities and poor child outcomes. As noted in the discussion, funding programs in Aboriginal communities at levels that are nominally “equal”

to those in non-Aboriginal communities will not be sufficient to address the significant historical inequities experienced by First Nations, including the legacy of residential schools. To truly advance better outcomes, roundtable participants stressed the importance of working together to increase public understanding and awareness of ECD program challenges and inequities, which will, in turn, create the political will to address these issues.

## **Building Leaders:** *Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities*

January 22, 2015  
University Hall, MacDonald Building  
Dalhousie University – Studley Campus  
6299 South Street  
Halifax

### **AGENDA**

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8:30am – 8:45am	<b>Arrival and networking</b>
8:45am – 9:00am	<b>Opening blessing by Thomas Christmas</b>
9:00am – 9:30am	<b>Opening remarks and introductions</b> <i>Why is the topic of this roundtable important/relevant? What is our aspirational goal for the outcome of this project?</i>
9:30am – 12:00pm	<b>Moderated discussion</b> <i>Roundtable participants will explore a number of questions, including:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What are some of the best practices/notable achievements in early childhood development in your local area or region?</li><li>• Where are the current challenges or barriers in early childhood development in your local area or region?</li><li>• What lessons can be learned from promising ECD policies or programs across Canada and abroad?</li><li>• What are key priorities for enhancing early childhood development in your local area or region?</li><li>• How can governments, the private sector, communities and families play a role in driving better outcomes for young children?</li></ul>
12:00pm – 1:00pm	<b>Working lunch</b> <i>In small groups, participants will identify key priorities for future action</i>
1:00pm – 1:25pm	<b>Conclusion of moderated discussion</b>
1:25pm – 1:30pm	<b>Closing remarks</b>

## Building Leaders:

### *Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities*

January 22, 2015

Halifax

#### PARTICIPANT LIST

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