



## The World How Increased Investment In Early Childhood Education Helps Indigenous Peoples.

Levers that Move the World: How Increased Investment in Early Childhood Education Helps Indigenous Peoples.

To break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and inequality, strategic investment in Indigenous-centered early childhood education is a critical tool requiring more attention.

How valuable is a year of schooling? It's a question many across Canada are considering with fresh eyes as the nation seeks to continue the progress being made toward reconciliation and equality for Indigenous peoples. While historically barriers have existed in education that have kept First Nations, Inuit, and Métis individuals and communities from reaching their full potential, new momentum and investments are opening new doors.

An area of particular focus is early childhood education (ECE). This foundational schooling can move the bar in significant ways when it comes to reducing poverty and unemployment, ending dependence on government care, and allowing Indigenous students to achieve their full educational potential by equipping them with the skills to succeed in academic settings. Yet for ECE to be most effective, it needs to be readily available and affordable to Indigenous parents.

Here, the new focus on this critical early-life learning framework will be examined, with an emphasis on what can be changed about the current process, the recommended roles public and private groups outside the Indigenous community can play, and what the community itself can change to claim more of the positive outcomes of ECE for the next generation.

### [How Does the Early Childhood Education Process for Indigenous Groups Need to Change?](#)

Currently, ECE is not as widely available to Indigenous peoples as it needs to be to meet the true needs of the population. This is not exclusively an Indigenous issue; across Canada, nearly 70 percent of mothers are in the workforce while space exists in qualified early care and education centers for less than 5 percent of children aged 0 to 3, and just 30 percent of children aged 3 to 5, according to the BC Alliance for Health Living. In rural and isolated areas, the issue is particularly acute, as there may be no spaces available for children whatsoever, or the existing spaces may have long waitlists. This has a disproportionately negative impact on traditional Indigenous communities located on reserves.

Thus, a major change needed is to increase the availability of ECE space throughout Canada with a particular emphasis on expanding availability on reserve and in rural zones. Funding seems to be less of an issue at present than simply making ECE centers a priority for building and planning committees. By actively encouraging the creation of new spaces, it becomes easier for communities



to encourage enrollment, subsidize care and classes for the young, and transform ECE into a central part of early childhood.

#### Recommended Public/Private Roles of Outside PARTNERING Groups.

Clearly, the government can – and should – take a leading role. Without government involvement, permissions for new spaces, funding for key programs, and protections for the underserved don't happen. Thus, the \$100 million built into the national 2017–2018 budget for ECE on reserve and the \$15 million allocated for off-reserve coordination is a positive sign.

And yet, a heavy-handed, top-down approach can be viewed with suspicion or seen as a repeat of the dictatorial moves of the past. Thus, instead of mandating one specific path for all, the national government can provide leadership by leaving implementation to the discretion of each provincial government.

One place this is already happening with positive results is in Ontario. Across the province, the local government has committed to doubling funds available for ECE, expanding the type and scope of ECE programs offered, and building more links between on reserve and off reserve opportunities for Indigenous communities. By providing funds, program choices, and pathways for greater connection but refraining from being strictly prescriptive in how each is implemented, the government is well on its way to achieving their public goal of doubling availability of ECE by 2021.

Private sector groups can help also. Culturally, encouraging ECE teachers and educators to pursue jobs located in rural and reserve communities would make a significant difference in staffing challenges. Supplemental funding – such as providing targeted scholarships for children or for additional staff rotations – would be welcomed. In particular, private groups looking to make a major impact could consider the dearth of special needs care even within otherwise strong ECE programs on reserves and take steps to provide additional funds, support, and services for that population.

#### Community Shifts to Achieve Better Early Education Outcomes.

No discussion of ECE for Indigenous peoples would be complete without a look at what the community itself could do differently to achieve better educational outcomes for its children.

In an April 2017 presentation at the International Meeting on Indigenous Child Health, researchers highlighted the results of a study on Inuit ECE they felt corresponded with nationwide Indigenous community issues. They identified several areas where communities could be doing more, including providing more family support, doing more with language to keep curriculums culturally relevant, and cultivating a higher perceived value of educational achievements.

Practical support for struggling families was particularly cited as a way to break out of past poverty cycles. In homes with food insecurity, drug or alcohol addictions, and low incomes, childcare and



education isn't a priority. To make the child's education and future appear more urgent and important, researchers recommended expanding food support through community ECE centers, offering supplemental counseling, and adding spaces for children rapidly so that parents would feel able to safely take advantage of employment opportunities that arose.

By incorporating ECE centers into the heart of the community as practical resource points, researchers noted that usage and perceived value of ECE increased. Showcasing language programs that honored the culture and traditional ways of knowing further reduced parental reluctance to have children in care, as did funding to offset program costs where appropriate.

Researchers further noted that these community shifts were something that could be expanded throughout the nation, linking up with the national push to allow each Indigenous child to reach more of their potential and making the most of the increasing investment in Indigenous-centered ECE.