

OPINION

Helping young children learn is the best investment we can make

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While British Columbians and our media focus on the provincial debt and budget deficits, we are ignoring a critical economic issue that could cost our provincial economy more than \$400 billion over the next 60 years.

In B.C. today, nearly one in three children enter kindergarten at risk of failing to develop into the healthy, well-educated and innovative adults we need to secure our long-term economic prosperity.

And, although poor children are more statistically likely to be vulnerable, the majority of vulnerable children in B.C. are part of the more populous middle class.

Why is this important? Because young children who are not school-ready are less likely to be job-ready. That's likely to cost the B.C. economy more than \$400 billion over the next 60 years.

Internationally unique data at the Human Early Learning Partnership, based at UBC, reveal that eliminating unnecessary child vulnerability is 10 times more valuable to the B.C. economy than eliminating the cumulative provincial debt.

If business leaders and politicians are to lift B.C. out of recession, it is imperative they recognize the economic value of reducing early vulnerability.

For the past decade, HELP has monitored the state of B.C. children in kindergarten.

Challenging the long-held notion that a rising tide will simply lift all boats, early vulnerability increased during the recent period of economic growth in B.C., rising from 26 per cent of kindergarten children in 2004 to 29 per cent in 2007, where it remains according to 2009 data.

B.C. suffers unnecessarily high early vulnerability across income classes because it is relying on old thinking to address 21st-century issues.

In the absence of an early learning and child-care system, public policy in B.C. and much of Canada remains nostalgic for a time when some women stayed home to rear young children,

while some men served as sole breadwinners on behalf of their families.

This nostalgia ignores the current reality that most mothers today are employed in order to: Help compensate for real declines in male wages; stave off persistently high rates of child and family poverty; and pursue equality.

As mothers allocate more time to employment, households struggle with less family time, in part because fathers have not managed to fill the care void. For men and women alike, work-life conflict is pervasive, irrespective of earnings, and time to care personally is a common casualty.

Research makes it clear that B.C. requires a new public investment of \$3 billion annually to support the time, resources and community services that fathers and mothers both need to care and earn in order to give the next generation of workers an optimal start.

Half of the investment will help families to enjoy more time and resources to care personally, with expanded parental leave and income supports, while the other half will expand community services, primarily early learning and child care.

These policy changes are required to reap the dramatic economic returns available from reducing early vulnerability. Over 60 years, the benefits to society will outweigh the costs by more than 6 to 1, growing GDP by 20 per cent more than if we do not invest. In the near term, improved support to parents alone will accelerate the labour

supply, improve work-life balance and reduce poverty.

These will in turn increase productivity and reduce public expenditures in areas such as health and social services.

The government of B.C. has committed to reduce early vulnerability to 15 per cent by 2015 — cutting the province's early vulnerability by half.

This is the right objective, and the government's introduction of full-day kindergarten for five-year-olds will be an important step. However, our research shows that addressing early vulnerability requires a more fundamental shift in how we think about the relationships between families, the econo-

my and public resources.

The very family policies that help children and parents thrive are also essential economic infrastructure for businesses concerned about the future quality of the labour force.

Therefore, HELP recommends moving primarily from treating illness, poverty and lack of education after the fact to promoting citizens' healthy development in their earliest years.

This preventative approach is much more cost-effective, generating economic stimulus in the short term, along with the human capital B.C. needs to thrive economically thereafter.

Only this bold policy reform will pre-

vent the brain drain that is most threatening to our economy: The future human capital losses that result from high child vulnerability today.

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