



BC Smart Family Policy 2010 Report Card: Assessing British Columbians' Support for Families with Young Children

Another Inconvenient Truth: Early Childhood Vulnerability Rises Above 30% across 53 School Districts.

A decade of research has shown that more than one quarter of BC children are vulnerable before entering kindergarten. Vulnerable children struggle to hold a pencil, follow instructions, get along with peers or know 10 letters. Most vulnerable children are not poor. Early vulnerability reflects the widespread challenges of balancing caring and earning for many families at all income levels.

While early vulnerability has increased in BC over the last decade, never before has the provincial rate broken the 30 percent barrier. But it now risks doing just this. In 53 of 59 BC school districts that provided data in 2009/10, 30.3% of kindergarten children were vulnerable, up from 28.5% in 2008/09. The rate across these 53 districts is double the provincial government's stated goal of reducing vulnerability to 15% by 2015 (*15 by 15*).

No school district or health authority meets government of BC 15 by 15 goal.

School district rates of early childhood vulnerability are 55% to 325% higher than biologically expected.

The cost of early brain drain in BC: 20% reduction in economic growth over six decades.

In 2009 the Business Council of BC commissioned UBC's Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) to put an economic price tag on the early brain drain in BC. HELP's study¹ found that ongoing vulnerability wastes more than \$400 billion from our economy today due to lost productivity and related health, crime and social costs. This early vulnerability debt is more than eight times larger than the current cumulative provincial debt.

The Solution: Children thrive when families thrive, so British Columbians need to advance **Smart Family Policy** that supports all families with young children to have enough:

Time: Expanded parental leave and family-friendly employment standards that support all mothers and fathers to care personally for their children. Family time is essential, yet BC reports the highest rates of work-life conflict in the country.

Services: Quality early learning and care services, parenting support and health promotion available for all children

Income: Additional financial support for the 10.4% of BC children who live in poor families.

50% of new investment for Mothers and Fathers to Support Parenting Time and Income.

50% of new investment for Community Services to Support Parents and Children

Assessing Our Progress to Date on Smart Family Policy Investments

	HELP 2009 Smart Family Policy Recommendations		Actual Results to 2010/11	Explanation
	Policy Highlights	Required New Annual Investments	Actual New Budget Allocations, <i>adjusted for inflation</i>	Includes both Federal and Provincial Investments
Time	Improve maternity/parental leave	\$585 million	No material change	The 2010 federal budget announced that the self-employed may elect to pay EI premiums and collect leave benefits in the future.
	Debate what we mean by full-time work	N/A	No material change	No discussion of fact that typical Canadian works 300 more paid hours per year than typical Dutch, German or Norwegian worker.
Services	Early learning and care (age 18 months to 5 years)	\$1.5 billion	\$50 million	3% of recommended new investment, primarily due to phase-in of full-school day kindergarten starting September, 2010, along with increasing child care subsidies for lower-income families.
	Coordinated parenting supports, including monthly health check-ins for children (birth to 18 months)	\$95 million	No material change highlighted	Communities report some funding reductions (for example, see Federation of Community Social Services of BC ⁱⁱ and First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition ⁱⁱⁱ)
Income	Make work pay	\$455 million	\$40 million	9% of recommended new investment, due to minor increases to provincial BC Rental Assistance Program and federal programs such as the Working Income Tax Benefit, Canada Child Tax Benefit/ National Child Benefit Supplement and the Universal Child Care Benefit.
	Increase welfare	\$365 million	\$55 million	15% of recommended new investment, because of increase to Social Assistance caseload during recession
Total		\$3 billion	\$145 million	Only 5% of recommended new investments made to date, because of <i>too little</i> public awareness, community & business support, and political leadership.

At this pace, implementation will take 20 years, 15 years longer than the provincial goal of achieving '15 by 15'.

A strong commitment to reduce early child vulnerability would phase in smart family policy over 5 years.

Only 5% of Recommended New Investment in Smart Family Policy Achieved to Date Grade for British Columbians: Needs Improvement

Responsibility for the unsatisfactory pace of investment in smart family policy is shared by all British Columbians. A fair start for children benefits everyone by promoting economic growth, population health, gender equality, crime reduction and social justice.

In order to realize these benefits, smart family policy change requires more awareness among the general public as well as community and business sector support, and political leadership.

Public Perceptions do not Reflect Reality^{iv}

Public Support

A recent province-wide poll shows that most British Columbians *UNDERESTIMATE* the level of early vulnerability. Only 18% know that nearly 30% of BC children are vulnerable before they reach kindergarten. The rest perceive, incorrectly, that the level is lower. Most British Columbians also *OVERESTIMATE* the amount Canada invests in family policy relative to other countries. Only 14% know that Canada actually places near the bottom of several international rankings. 86% think that Canadian policy is more generous than it is in reality.

But... when aware of the problem, the public supports solutions: Once advised of the actual rate of child vulnerability the vast majority of British Columbians (88%), support the BC government's 15 by 15 commitment and the largest investments required to make it happen (affordable, quality child care services – 89%; resources for low-income families – 83%).



Community Support is Increasing

Community Support

Community leaders are increasingly engaged and committed to action. For example, there is widespread community support for a BC poverty reduction plan that includes improved access to quality child care services for all families. Community engagement also contributed to the recent adoption of a living wage policy by the City of New Westminster, the first municipality in Canada to commit to paying both direct and contract employees at or above an hourly family living wage.

Furthermore, a range of organizations and community roundtables across the province are hosting *15 by 15* presentations and related discussions. For example, YWCA Vancouver shares in the cost of polling British Columbians about awareness of early child vulnerability and United Way of the Lower Mainland supports the dissemination of *15 by 15* public awareness materials.



Corporate Leadership



Political Leadership

Corporate Leadership is Growing

Business engagement on Smart Family Policy is growing. This is evident, for example, from:

- the Business Council of BC’s commissioning of HELP’s *15 by 15* report,
- the Vancouver Board of Trade’s work on *Kids ‘n Crime*,^v
- the participation of business leaders at the City of Vancouver’s recent *Inspiring Innovation* symposium and similar meetings and conferences across the province,
- the decision of Vancity representatives to share in the cost of convening business leaders and polling British Columbians about their awareness of early vulnerability,
- the willingness of several business leaders to provide supportive testimonials,^{vi} and
- the Canadian Chamber of Commerce approval of a resolution brought forward by the Burnaby Board of Trade regarding public funding for early childhood development.

Political Leadership is Challenging

Political leadership at the federal level remains quiet about the issue of early child vulnerability in Canada, despite prioritizing child and maternal health in international meetings of the G8 and G20.

The BC provincial government’s political leadership in support of full-school-day kindergarten is noteworthy, especially since it continued during the recession. But the full-school-day kindergarten and child care subsidy expenditures are incremental steps toward the new investment or re-allocation required for smart family policy. There are also concerns about reduced expenditures in other child and family support programs.

BC’s official opposition has focused primarily on the human capital returns from investing in Kindergarten to Grade 12 education. But the lack of attention to vulnerability prior to school entry is a missed opportunity, given the widely-held consensus that the most cost-effective human capital interventions occur among young children.

Reducing the rate of early vulnerability to 15% by 2015 is the first performance measure the province is using to monitor its overall progress.^{vii} 15 by 15 is an important target, but political leadership is challenging in the absence of broad public awareness and support for government action.

	Broad Awareness Lacking	Increasing Interest & Engagement	Commitment to Action	Prepared to Pay or Reallocate to Achieve Goal
Public Support	●			
Community Support		●	●	
Corporate Leadership		●		
Political Leadership		●		

To Achieve Significant Progress on Smart Family Policy, We Need a Genuine Dialogue about Priorities and Trade-Offs

In addition to raising public awareness about the problem of child vulnerability, British Columbians need to talk about how to find new funding or reallocate existing dollars in order to invest in the social and economic benefits that smart family policy will promote. Here are the facts.

Smart family policy requires (some combination of):

- new public expenditure (i.e., higher taxes),
- new business investment (i.e., parental leave top-ups, financial support for early learning and care services, human resource strategies that reduce long hours for some employees, higher minimum wages and/or employer adoption of living wage policies),
- reallocation from other public expenditure (i.e., we spend less in other areas) and
- deficit financing (i.e., spend now, pay later).

If we don't like any of these four options, the only other option is accepting the status quo - 30% of children vulnerable, many parents stressed, and compromises to gender equality, population health, crime reduction and economic growth.

So... as British Columbians continue to debate the HST we must ask ourselves: if not the HST, then what tax? And if no tax, then what will we do without? A fair start for children? Health promotion? A stronger economy?

... **Or** as British Columbians discuss maintaining or increasing public investment in current areas, we must ask ourselves what are we not investing in? A fair start for children? Gender equality? Crime reduction?

... **Or** as British Columbians consider economic development strategies to recover from the recession, we must ask ourselves: are some strategies better than others at promoting future economic growth and population health?

... **Or** as British Columbians grapple with the implications of public debt and deficits, we must ask ourselves, should we pay now or pay later for the investment required to help children thrive? Over their lifetimes, today's adults have benefited from increased public spending that has doubled the public debt-to-GDP ratio. Why are we reluctant to pay more now? Do we prefer to finance our investment from the future economic returns projected from smart family policy?

These are key questions that British Columbians must discuss and resolve if we are to move beyond the failing grade for family policy for which we all share responsibility. Please start talking about them: at your dinner tables, among your neighbours, in your offices and with your political leaders.

The Human Early Learning Partnership:

- ❖ HELPs children and families thrive
- ❖ HELPs communities improve the lives of families with young children
- ❖ HELPs government improve policies and programs for families with children

As a network of five BC universities, and based at the College for Inter-Disciplinary Studies at the University of British Columbia, the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) is an inter-disciplinary, nonpartisan research and community development resource for all British Columbians.

The World Health Organization recognizes HELP as the global knowledge hub in research about early childhood. HELP uses its internationally celebrated expertise to advance the importance of children's earliest years towards healthier families, communities and economies.

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ⁱ 15 by 15 Report: <http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca/research/initiatives/social-change/15-by-15-smart-family-policy/>

ⁱⁱ "Flashback to the '50s for BC budget": <http://www.fcssbc.ca/uploads/March2010newsletter.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Minutes: First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition Early Childhood Development Roundtable meeting: <http://www.firstcallbc.org/pdfs/EarlyChildhood/1-Minutes%2026%20May%202010.pdf>

^{iv} Smart Family Policy: BC-Wide Polling Results Show Overwhelming Support for Significant Spending on Children at Risk: <http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca/wp-uploads/web.help.ubc.ca/2010/09/15-by-15-YWCA-Vancouver-poll-Final.pdf>

^v "Business releases landmark report making economic case for early childhood investment: Pay now or pay more later": http://www.boardoftrade.com/membershipBenefits/Member-News/10-09-13/Business_releases_landmark_report_making_economic_case_for_early_childhood_investment_Pay_now_or_pay_more_later.aspx

^{vi} Fast Facts: Smart Family Policy for Strong Economies: http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca/wp-uploads/web.help.ubc.ca/2010/04/Smart-Family-Policy-for-Strong-Economies_What-Business-Leaders-are-Saying-Final1.pdf

^{vii} Province of British Columbia: Strategic Plan: http://www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2010/stplan/2010_Strategic_Plan.pdf