

CANADA'S  
PUBLIC POLICY

**FORUM**

DES POLITIQUES PUBLIQUES  
DU CANADA

BUILDING LEADERS  
Early childhood Development in Indigenous Communities

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Edmonton Roundtable Summary  
January 2015



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# FORUM

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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 December 11, 2014, the Forum convened the first roundtable in Edmonton. Hosted by the Government of Alberta, 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 Western Canada, the roundtable discussion provided insights into the state of ECD programming in British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. In particular, the discussion focused on Aboriginal Head Start and child care programs that enhance child development and school readiness in both on-reserve and off-reserve Indigenous communities. While participants highlighted positive developments across jurisdictions, they also noted that access to Head Start and child care programs remains uneven and that funding has not increased over the past decade, despite growing demand.

### ***British Columbia***

Over the past decade, program coverage for Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve has reached 50 percent of eligible children, while urban areas continue to see more significant gaps in programming. B.C. has also established an infant development program although access is limited. Another key development in the province is the emergence of the First Nations Health Authority, which shifts health governance from the federal government to First Nations communities. The first of its kind in Canada, this community-based model of healthcare has the potential to facilitate a more coordinated approach to ECD programming by reducing jurisdictional boundaries and building strategic partnerships.

As more work is needed to improve program access and capacity, ECD leaders in the province are exploring opportunities for greater community alignment, such as working with First Nations leaders to co-locate Head Start and child care programs on-reserve to improve access across the province.

### ***Alberta***

With ECD as a priority of the current government, Alberta is working with communities to improve programming across the province. Notable developments include funding for additional Parent Link Centres (PLCs) that deliver parenting and family services, as well as programs that engage fathers in the care of their young children. At present, there are 50 PLCs across the province, including 5 dedicated Aboriginal PLCs in various urban communities. Many other PLCs serve Aboriginal families, including families who may travel from reserves to receive these services. To date, there are no PLCs located on-reserve; however, their success has generated interest from First Nations communities regarding the possibility of establishing PLCs on-reserve. Participants advocated greater collaboration between the

federal government, provincial government, and First Nations leaders to ensure better access to PLCs for families living on-reserve.

Participants provided examples of First Nations communities that have been successful in accessing both federal and provincial ECD program resources to meet the specific needs of families. Reflecting this community-based approach is the work of the Opokaa'sin Early Intervention Society (OEIS) in Lethbridge. OEIS has mobilized Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations to work toward common goals established through consultation with families and elders to understand the specific needs in the community, such as culturally appropriate ECD programming, Blackfoot language instruction and integration of Head Start and child care programming on-site. Community partnerships have been instrumental in overcoming funding and capacity constraints. Some of the key benefits of OEIS' approach are parental engagement, ongoing community engagement in steering programs, the involvement of elders, and collaboration with the local university to monitor program outcomes and incorporate research findings on best practices.

### ***Saskatchewan***

In Saskatchewan, every reserve provides child care services and Head Start programs. For quality assurance, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN) has also established child care policies and regulations that are either consistent with or more rigorous than provincial standards. In addition to criteria related to staff qualifications, health and safety, and child/provider ratios, FSIN standards also emphasize the importance of incorporating culture and language in ECD programming. Despite growing demand for ECD services, program funding levels have not increased since 1996, resulting in low wages for ECD providers and limited resources to enhance administrative supports.

## **Key Issues and Considerations**

Participants noted that as Aboriginal Head Start nears its 20-year anniversary, the success of the program is evident in its long-term impact on participants across jurisdictions. The early intervention approach driven by families and communities has supported positive outcomes in children. Many of those that have participated in Aboriginal Head Start also become involved in the program as workers later in life, which reinforces its community-building role. Roundtable participants stressed the value of sharing best practices and communicating program value to funders. They also noted opportunities for enabling collaboration between on and off-reserve programs and accommodating the diversity of needs facing Indigenous children and families.

While many of the developments across jurisdictions demonstrate progress in ECD, a number of common challenges were raised throughout the roundtable discussion. Participants expressed frustrations regarding funding levels and arrangements, research impact, and leadership capacity. Broader issues such as poverty, associated unhealthy home environments, and the capacity and accountability of leaders at all levels play a role in ECD across Indigenous communities.

### ***Funding Constraints***

The fact that ECD funding levels have not kept pace with community demands and regulatory requirements has created operational, programming, and human resource challenges across the board. Participants commented on the impact of low wages on the retention and living standards of ECD

educators, who are expected to upgrade their credentials regardless of prior life experiences and in the face of limited funding for upgrading. Economic development tends to be the focus of both government and community leaders, even though economic prosperity is tied to human capital investment. (Participants noted that some political leaders seem unaware of the extensive and conclusive evidence on the long-term return on investments in early childhood development.) Other issues stemming from inadequate funding include cutbacks to cultural programming and language instruction and difficulties in meeting updated government regulations.

### ***Jurisdictional Barriers***

Current funding arrangements based on jurisdictional divisions can leave Indigenous families in a state of limbo. First Nations communities already face funding constraints, but when families move off reserve in search of more opportunities and specific services, such as programs for children with special needs, they are frequently referred back to their reserve as eligibility for provincial supports is not always easy to establish.

### ***Research Impact***

Roundtable participants seemed to agree that more effort is needed to put ECD research into practice, especially when research grants can be easier to secure than program funding. Finding the right balance between research and action involves leveraging knowledge to improve outcomes and identifying where further study can add value. Although more work is needed to make an economic case for ECD investments, promising research developments include a longitudinal study of the Aboriginal Head Start program in B.C. and the establishment of a B.C. Regional Innovation Chair in Aboriginal ECD to improve programming through collaboration between researchers and Indigenous communities.

### ***Capacity Building***

From building community relationships and communicating program value to ensuring program quality and supporting professional development, community-based leadership plays an integral role in the long-term success of ECD programs. Examples of ECD leadership, management, and educator training can be found across jurisdictions. Given the turnover rate, the FSIN is developing workshops for leaders, directors of health and education, and counsellors. To ensure program quality, the Aboriginal Head Start Association of B.C. has initiated self-monitoring based on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, an internationally recognized evaluation tool.

## **Future Action**

Based on the issues and considerations discussed at the roundtable, most participants see value in conducting a full examination of systemic gaps and best practices in ECD programming for Indigenous communities. Priority actions include reviewing funding levels for Aboriginal Head Start programs and addressing the jurisdictional quagmire that creates inequities in funding levels and program offerings between on and off-reserve communities, as well as barriers to the easy transition of families between on and off-reserve settings. Some participants recommend more dialogue between governments and community leaders, while others support the application of Jordan's Principle to ECD programming, which would place the rights of the child ahead of jurisdictional disputes.

Collaboration through partnerships and knowledge exchange can also support capacity building. For instance, combining research and community expertise may help develop valuable tools and strategies,

such as impact assessment models. Another recommendation is ensuring accountability in program delivery and community leadership, as well as research and government. Taking a more holistic view, participants stressed the importance of creating an understanding of how poverty and other social determinants negatively impact the ability of a child to reach their full potential. In particular, communication plays a key role in building the political will to invest in effective leadership and sustainable solutions.

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

December 11, 2014  
Boardroom 336, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
Sterling Place  
9940 – 106th Street  
Edmonton

### AGENDA

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8:30am – 8:45am	<b>Arrival and networking</b>
8:45am – 9:00am	<b>Opening blessing by Elder Dolphus Yellowdirt, Alexander First Nation</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 – 11:45am	<b>Moderated discussion</b> <i>Roundtable participants will be asked to 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>
11:45am – 12:00pm	<b>Wrap-up comments</b>
12:00pm – 1:30pm	<b>Networking lunch</b>

## Building Leaders:

### *Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities*

December 11, 2014

Edmonton

#### PARTICIPANT LIST

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