

CANADA'S  
PUBLIC POLICY

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DES POLITIQUES PUBLIQUES  
DU CANADA

BUILDING LEADERS  
Early childhood Development in Indigenous Communities

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Winnipeg Roundtable Summary  
March 2015



CANADA'S  
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 29, 2015, the Forum convened a roundtable discussion in Winnipeg. Hosted by the University of Manitoba, 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.

## The Current Context

With representation from across sectors, the roundtable discussion provided insights into the state of ECD programming for Indigenous communities across Manitoba. While funding models continue to present challenges for program access and sustainable impact, successful initiatives are addressing resource inequities through collaboration and community engagement.

### ***Funding Challenges***

Resources for ECD programming have not kept pace with the demands of growing communities and evolving contexts. Despite ample data and research on the range of challenges facing Indigenous communities across the province, resources are not flowing to where they are needed most. In particular, capacity issues and jurisdictional divisions have contributed to inequities in ECD. As Indigenous communities are struggling to overcome the legacy of residential schools and to improve outcomes among the growing youth population, many participants support the principle of proportional universality, whereby communities would receive funding based on their particular level of need. Taking an equity-based approach to funding may help bridge the current gap in life chances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

### ***Jurisdictional Divisions***

A key barrier to equitable funding is the lack of coordination across jurisdictions and federal departments. In addition to service gaps and duplications on reserves, conflicting criteria across the range of funding options further undermines access to resources. In fact, some Indigenous children with special needs are placed into care when the necessary on-reserve supports are not available. While Health Canada's Maternal and Child Health Program was intended to address those gaps, some participants noted service duplication with the Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve initiative. Ambiguity around the responsibility for non-status Indigenous children and eligibility for off-reserve funding also creates further service barriers, especially as the urban Indigenous population continues to grow in Manitoba. Given the number of Indigenous children in foster care, participants emphasized the need for a preventative model of child welfare that focuses on supporting families living on and off-reserve.

### ***Capacity Issues***

Without adequate, sustainable funding, ECD program recruitment and retention has become a challenge as communities cannot offer job security, competitive salaries, or training opportunities. While capacity

building is dependent on resources, communities need trained staff to secure funding through the current application-based system. For instance, even though Aboriginal Head Start has been a success, communities with the greatest need do not have access to those supports if they lack the capacity to produce successful proposals. To be eligible for funding under the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative, early learning and child care centres must also be provincially licensed or have a mutually agreed upon arrangement with the province. With limited resources, these centres are unable to build the capacity needed to meet licensing standards set by the province. Indigenous communities in Manitoba are working together with the provincial and federal governments to find a sustainable solution to this challenge.

### ***Promising Developments***

Recognizing the importance of early learning for future development, the province has already made significant strides in addressing many of the challenges discussed. Implemented in 2000 and legislated in 2007, Healthy Child Manitoba (HCM) is a cross-departmental organization aimed at improving supports for children, youth, and families through better coordination across departments, governments, and communities. This horizontal, child-centred approach to ECD has enabled the province to better respond to community needs and to build on best practices.

An example of success is the partnership between Healthy Child Manitoba (HCM) and the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre (MFNERC) to provide teacher training in the Seeds of Empathy and Roots of Empathy programs in First Nations communities. HCM established a strong partnership with MFNERC by focusing on relationship building and working together to develop programming based on research and community input. Not only does this partnership prove that political will can overcome jurisdictional barriers, but it also demonstrates that collaboration requires mutual respect, as overly prescriptive approaches tend to ignore community assets and perspectives. Despite the positive impact, MFNERC programs delivered in partnership with HCM may not be sustainable as a result of federal funding cuts.

## **Key Considerations**

As a response to common funding challenges, participants seemed to support flexibility on policy but not on equity, emphasizing the need to pool resources and coordinate efforts to address gaps in ECD services. Other considerations beyond funding emerged in the discussion, including the need for culturally-relevant programming, the benefits of a holistic approach, and the importance of building public awareness.

### ***Integrating Cultural Content***

Indigenous knowledge and languages are not consistently integrated into current approaches to ECD. Culturally-appropriate instruction is particularly important given the impact of colonialism on identity and the lack of legislation to protect Indigenous languages. Teaching Indigenous knowledge across ECD programs can also benefit non-Indigenous children by exposing them to diverse perspectives. Although the lack of Indigenous educators and dedicated funding for cultural content presents constraints, some communities are leveraging their own resources, such as elders and other experts, to transfer Indigenous languages and knowledge systems to the next generation. Similar to the Aboriginal Head Start programs, the strength of the Winnipeg Boldness Project lies in the active involvement of cultural leaders within the community.

### ***Taking a Holistic Approach***

Most participants agreed that ECD should be viewed as a continuum given that early years serve as the foundation for lifelong development. ECD also encompasses multiple components, from physical and mental health to cultural and spiritual connection. These elements depend on the overall well-being of families, which are shaped by their communities. Based on the connections between the various factors involved, ECD programming needs to take a holistic approach that considers lifelong learning, the different dimensions of development, and the importance of building strong families and communities.

### ***Shaping Public Policy***

Indigenous communities need to recognize that they can put ECD at the top of the political agenda by reaching out across society to build support for action. Active engagement can lead to increased political clout given the size of the Indigenous population in Manitoba. Data is also important for decision making and quality control, although some participants were less convinced of the need for more research. Others suggested sharing positive narratives whenever possible to counter the negative images often perpetuated by the media. To advance the progress achieved, a concerted effort is needed to build awareness among leaders across sectors and Indigenous communities of the role that ECD plays in securing future prosperity.

## **Future Action**

Work is underway to address funding challenges and improve the quality of ECD programs in Manitoba, including further consultations with First Nations communities. A common theme throughout the discussion was collaboration across departments, governments, and sectors, as well as with and between communities. By working together, stakeholders can not only share best practices and combine resources, but also improve coordination to ensure that funding arrangements are actually meeting community needs. To be effective, partnerships need to respect the self-determination of Indigenous communities and appreciate the complications around jurisdictional divisions. Technology can also help improve access to supports and connect rural and urban communities. With the potential for new directions in a federal election year, creating a sense of urgency around ECD challenges, as well as the broader issue of poverty, may help advance a more equitable and holistic funding system that provides comprehensive, sustainable supports to Indigenous children irrespective of their status and their residence.

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

January 29, 2015

Alan A. Borger Senior Executive Conference Room (Room E1-270)  
Engineering and Information Technology Complex  
University of Manitoba – Fort Garry Campus  
66 Chancellors Circle  
Winnipeg

### **AGENDA**

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8:30am – 8:45am	<b>Arrival and networking</b>
8:45am – 9:00am	<b>Opening blessing by Elder Norman Meade</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 29, 2015

Winnipeg

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