

OUR GROWING CHALLENGE

SIX IDEAS THAT COULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE

RECOMMENDATION:

WORK WITH NATIONAL CHIEF SHAWN ATLEO

There's an opportunity for B.C. in the election of Shawn Atleo as national chief of the Assembly of First Nations last year. Atleo hails from the Tofino area, historic home of the Ahousaht First Nation.

If decades of aboriginal poverty and marginalization are to end, we need to invest in aboriginal children — the fastest growing segment of Canadian youth.

Chief Atleo, in his own prescription published as part of this series on Thursday, laid a heavy emphasis on education. *The Province* recommends that the B.C. government — and anyone else qualified to bring expertise and resources to the problem — work with Chief Atleo on a pilot project to improve high-school completion rates for aboriginal youth in both on-reserve schools and in the public education system.

"Our priority looking forward is education," said Atleo, who issued a call to all premiers in August to work with First Nations to support aboriginal education and has said he welcomes *The Province's* proposal.

An action plan to improve education outcomes for aboriginal children should be implemented, possibly based on the First Nations-based Life-long Learning Model, which encourages approaches to education that engage the community and advance aboriginal culture.

Specific targets should be set to measure progress in areas such as high-school graduation rates and participation in sports and recreational programs at school.

Early evidence suggests that this model may yield dramatic increases in education attainment and overall learning and community harmony, says Atleo.

Currently, the numbers are dismal. Almost 48 per cent of aboriginal kindergarten-age kids are vulnerable and not ready for Grade 1, compared with 30 per cent for B.C. children overall. Only 48 per cent of aboriginal youth complete high school within six years of enrolling in Grade 8 compared with an 80-per-cent graduation rate for non-aboriginals.

B.C. should set itself the goal of working with Chief Atleo to make progress that could serve as an example for all of Canada.

IN TODAY'S CONCLUSION OF A 12-PART SERIES ON HOW PARENTS AND GOVERNMENT CAN GIVE B.C. KIDS A BETTER START IN LIFE, THE PROVINCE'S GROWING CHALLENGE TEAM OFFERS ITS OWN SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE



BILL KEAY — PNG

Kindergarten children's personal items are stored in a colourful collection of plastic bins at Prince Charles Elementary in Surrey.

RECOMMENDATION:

INCREASE SUPPORT FOR YOUNG FAMILIES

More and more families in B.C. are dual-income households where both parents are in the labour force.

To help alleviate the time and financial pressures facing young parents, *The Province* supports two recommendations from the 15 by 15 report issued by the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) last year.

First, extend maternal and parental leave from one year to 18 months and increase the benefits so that parents don't take such a financial hit to stay home with their children — an estimated

annual cost of \$585 million.

Next, implement a universal early childhood education and care program for children 18 months to five years old so that all kids, regardless of their socioeconomic status, will have equal access to a high-quality, nurturing, learning environment.

The universal (but not mandatory) model should have part-time or full-time options and require parents to make a contribution. This could be capped at an average of 20 per cent of the cost and organized

on a sliding scale, so that low-income families can access the program for free.

The parent fee would work out to \$3,400 to \$5,000 per year (or \$13.50 to \$20 a day), depending on the child's age and assuming childcare is utilized on a full-time, year-round, full-employment-day basis.

At \$1.5 billion a year, this universal childcare system would not be cheap, but it's critically needed, says 15 by 15 co-author Paul Kershaw. "It fills the major piece of our family policy puzzle."

RECOMMENDATION:

TEACH PARENTING SKILLS

According to Dr. Clyde Hertzman, director of the University of B.C.'s world-leading Human Early Learning Partnership team: "Early life experiences can actually change the way in which our genes express themselves. So it's no longer a question of nature or nurture — it's a question of how nurture changes nature."

That means parents have to be ready to make use of crucial development opportunities before their children turn five, or their brains will not develop to their full potential, possibly setting them up for failure in life.

Most parents can provide the love, language, cuddling and care that's needed in the home.

The bad news is too many parents don't know what else they should be doing.

With world-leading research coming out of UBC on "best practices" for parents of young children, it makes sense that this knowledge should make its way into schools across the province. Starting in high school, students should learn

about being great future parents, and preparing for the awesome responsibility of nurturing a young brain.

Parents-to-be should be taught the crucial lessons, and the teaching and outreach should continue to age three to cover what HELP says is the "densest time" of brain development.

RECOMMENDATION:

DEVELOP SURREY'S HUB-SCHOOL MODEL

Across the province, too many young children are left to fend for themselves after school — sometimes taking care of younger siblings, sometimes getting into trouble, even danger — because their parents work and can't afford childcare.

Meanwhile, B.C.'s huge investment in school infrastructure too often sits empty and idle after the 3 p.m. bell each day.

The City of Surrey and the Surrey School District have recognized the benefit of installing "community hub schools" within their district — embedding services within the existing school administration and staff, especially after-school activities. It's a well-executed model that allows education and community spirit to flourish from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. and gives young families much-needed support.

What's unique in Surrey is that instead of hiring independent service programmers at each community school, at about \$60,000 to \$80,000 per hire, the Surrey district has one "zone co-ordinator" with several assistants running a hub consisting of four to six community schools. There is a big upfront cost-saving in administrative salaries, and allocation of resources among the schools in the hub is more efficient.

On top of that, the Surrey hub schools engage the district's teachers so that the whole education system works hand in hand to "change the culture" and better meet community needs, says Merlin Chatwin, co-ordinator of Surrey's community hub schools.

With all this in place, outside community groups, volunteers and businesses can easily plug into the system, adding funding and free programs to maximize community benefit.

Clearly, hub schools could be an important part of the solution to B.C.'s growing problem with children who are vulnerable because of the pressures young families face.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY IAN SMITH — PNG

RECOMMENDATION:

JOIN THE VILLAGE

In the growing challenge to raise the children of B.C., we all need to pitch in. There's no way government programs and funding alone can close the gap.

One of the biggest challenges facing young families in B.C. is finding affordable, quality housing. And experts say we are seeing more and more vulnerability creeping into middle-class families because even dual-income parents can't afford, or even find, quality childcare.

These young families are often working harder than anyone else in Canada, sacrificing family time while trying to realize the ever-receding dream of owning a home.

What's the answer?

No one has come up with a way to bring housing back within reach of young families. But the community can come together to lighten the load. Families can help each other to meet their work-life scheduling problems. Big brothers need to spend time with boys who don't have a father in the home. Parents whose children are grown and well established need to reach out to other young families, volunteering their time and experience.

Especially in hard economic times, we need to draw together as supportive communities. Volunteering has to become popular again, as Michael McKnight, CEO of the United Way of the Lower Mainland, has said.

Here is a list provided by the United Way of groups that would welcome direct volunteer participation:

- ¶ Vantage Point
- ¶ Volunteer Richmond Information Services
- ¶ Volunteer Burnaby
- ¶ Big Brothers of Greater Vancouver
- ¶ Big Sisters of B.C. Lower Mainland
- ¶ Community Volunteer Connections
- ¶ YMCA of Greater Vancouver
- ¶ YWCA Vancouver
- ¶ Scouts Canada Fraser Valley Council
- ¶ Scouts Canada Pacific Coast Council

For a list of volunteer centres in the province go to:

volunteerbc.bc.ca/centres/centres.html

RECOMMENDATION:

HELP LOW-INCOME EARNERS

B.C. continues to lead the country in statistical child poverty. Young children are falling behind, possibly for life, because their parents often can't afford basics such as quality housing and nutritious food.

B.C.'s government must throw a lifeline to low-income earners and welfare recipients with much-needed reforms.

First, it's high time to raise the minimum wage from \$8 an hour, now the lowest in Canada. By comparison, Alberta's minimum wage is \$8.80, Manitoba's is \$9 and Ontario's is \$10.25.

B.C. has the highest poverty rates and most unaffordable living costs in the country. The minimum wage should be \$10.

Next, B.C.'s welfare system needs fixing. This province has the worst "welfare trap" in the country, according to data from the National Council of Welfare, an advisory body to the federal government.

We are the only province that doesn't allow families on welfare to earn an income (with exceptions for those with disabilities) without clawing back every dollar from their welfare cheques.

Also, based on data from 2007, B.C. has among the lowest exemption rates for existing assets. To qualify for support, applicants must have less than \$250 in the bank and once on welfare, recipients can't build up more than \$2,500 in savings.

This system is punitive and counter-productive. How can welfare recipients rebuild their lives when they're not allowed to save for the future or enter the labour force?

As the NCW says: "Ensuring that people are destitute when they come onto welfare could very well trap them in a web of dependency. Earnings exemptions are an important bridge from welfare to paid employment... they also encourage recipients to gain work experience and make the transition to the labour market."

Most provinces allow welfare recipients to keep several hundred dollars of earnings per month, based on a flat rate or percentage of earnings.

The Province recommends that family welfare recipients in B.C. be allowed to retain 50 per cent of net earnings, as is done in Ontario.

Finally, according to the latest available estimates from the NCW, B.C.'s welfare incomes for families are among the lowest in the country in relation to standard of living costs. These should be raised by between 15 and 20 per cent.



You'll find the entire Growing Challenge series at **theprovince.com/news/growing-challenge**

OUR GROWING CHALLENGE

**'KIDS WHO ARE NOT READY
FOR SCHOOL ARE LESS
LIKELY TO BE JOB READY.'**

— UBC PROF. PAUL KERSHAW

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

UBC researcher Paul Kershaw is the lead author of *15 by 15*, a blueprint for reducing child vulnerability prepared for the provincial government.



PHOTOS BY BILL KEAY—PNG

START EARLY AND SAVE LATER

That's the prescription in a report intended as the road map for the future of B.C.'s children

BY CHERYL CHAN
STAFF REPORTER

Armed with a laptop and a raft of statistics, University of B.C. Prof. Paul Kershaw has been travelling across the province — a one-man road show trying to change B.C. one talk at a time.

He has one simple message: that B.C.'s early childhood

vulnerability rate of 30 per cent isn't just bad from a social standpoint, it's a disaster from a business perspective.

The many kindergarten-aged children who are struggling today represent a "brain drain" that compromises B.C.'s future human capital.

In other words, says Kershaw: "Kids who are not ready for school are less likely to be job ready."

In 2009, the government com-

mitted to a goal of lowering vulnerability to 15 per cent by 2015.

At around the same time, the Business Council of B.C. commissioned UBC's Human Early Learning Partnership to calculate what early vulnerability will cost the economy.

The findings, laid out in a policy document called *15 by 15*, are compelling (the title is derived from the government's own stat-

ed goal to reduce the child-vulnerability rate).

Tolerating today's high vulnerability rate is equivalent to throwing away a \$400-billion investment, says Kershaw, lead author of the report, referring to the reduced effectiveness in the economy of people who are not properly supported in their childhood.

"That's 10 times B.C.'s provincial debt and 12 times all B.C. exports

in 2008," he adds, reeling off statistics in an impassioned voice.

The "ambitious but achievable" plan makes a number of recommendations designed to halve B.C.'s vulnerability rate in five years.

The centrepiece is a \$1.5-billion-a-year universal childcare program (which will require parents who can afford it to cover some of the costs), but the report also calls for hiking the minimum wage and



OUR SIX PROPOSALS: MINISTER POLAK RESPONDS

BY SAM COOPER
STAFF REPORTER

Province's recommendations, and dedicating a large portion of these funds specifically for aboriginal parents.

We also proposed increasing support for young families by rolling out a universal [but not mandatory] early learning and care program, and extending parental leave benefits.

Polak said the government is promising a major shift in funding, which will mean the early educational and care landscape will be much more comprehensive by 2015, although she would not commit to defined spending targets or a universal system.

The Province also recommended that the government recognize the success of community "hub schools" in Surrey, and promote similar programs across B.C., with targeted funding.

"Surrey has a great model, no question," Polak said, adding the government will work to see "best practices" identified in Surrey duplicated across B.C.

To directly tackle poverty reduction, *The Province* recommended boosting the minimum wage from Canada's lowest rate of \$8 to \$10; raising welfare rates and doing away with the "welfare trap" that doesn't allow recipients to keep any earnings from work.

None of those proposals will be considered, Polak said. The government believes that raising the minimum wage would in fact raise poverty rates, because businesses would cut jobs.

The government remains committed to Campbell's promise to reduce the number of developmentally vulnerable children in B.C. to 15 per cent by 2015, Polak said, but a solid yearly funding target to reach the goal has yet to be defined.

■ A more detailed account of the minister's response has been posted to our website at theprovince.com/news/growing-challenge.

The government of Premier Gordon Campbell acknowledges B.C. has a significant problem with child poverty and lack of support for young families, but is reluctant to commit to a comprehensive plan and funding strategy to tackle it.

That's the bottom line taken away from a wide-ranging interview with Minister of Children and Family Development Mary Polak on *The Province's* special series "The Growing Challenge."

Polak responded in place of Campbell, who did not make himself available, to *The Province's* six key policy proposals (Pages A14 to 15) targeted at giving our children the best start in life.

"The important thing coming out of [*The Province's*] reporting and the questions you are asking is not that we agree necessarily on the specific measures we need to take, but that our [shared] goal is we want to find the measures to provide the support that we know is needed for families," Polak said.

The Province proposed that the B.C. government work with National Chief Shawn Atleo on a pilot project to improve high-school completion rates for aboriginal youth, which could lead the way to improving First Nations outcomes in Canada. Atleo said he would welcome the partnership, and Polak also said the government is open to the possibility.

"I think Shawn is bang on [in his education-based proposals]," Polak said. "He is a very solution-based person with good ideas. If we are really going to tackle what I would call the real poverty question in B.C., it's around the aboriginal community."

Polak also said the government is committed to increasing teaching of parenting skills in B.C., one of *The*

welfare rates, increasing parental leave, redefining "full-time" hours and integrating existing health, pregnancy and parenting support programs.

In total, the price tag is estimated at \$3 billion annually.

It might sound like a staggering number, but Kershaw says it will be money well spent because such an investment now will translate to an extra 20-per-cent growth in GDP in 60 years.

Studies, including some conducted by Nobel Prize economist James Heckman, have shown that investing in early childhood education gets the most bang for the buck, with a return of \$6 for every dollar spent.

Investments in high-school or post-secondary education and job-skills training simply aren't as effective because they ignore the biological reality that the human brain is the most malleable during the early years.

Kershaw says \$3 billion is only a fraction of what B.C. sinks into health care, where costs continue to soar at a rate that outpaces social spending anywhere else. What's needed, he says, is less money to fund the "disease system" and more dollars going to prevention.

"If we really want to promote health, we wouldn't be letting our citizens be vulnerable in their earliest years."

But \$3 billion for something that won't reap benefits for decades isn't

You told us what you think



And you can read a selection of your responses to our series on our letters page today (Page A23).

Also, turn to Page A22 to read Growing Challenge team leader Ros Guggi's closing thoughts.

an easy sell to a cash-strapped government.

"There is an uncertainty about where to track down the additional billions of dollars," says Kershaw. "But it can be done."

"This means asking for hard trade-offs. Where are we going to allocate from? Are we doing this through deficit financing? Are we willing to forego tax cuts in the short term to reap tax cuts down the road?"

Kershaw became an advocate of early childhood and family supports when his work in social justice policy — minimizing inequality, promoting health and stronger, fairer economies — took him down an unexpected road.

"If you're interested in social growth, social equality, the health of populations, it all leads you back to how we support families when their kids are young," he says.

This month alone, Kershaw has

already made at least 15 presentations to politicians, educators and business and community leaders at various venues, including to the Vancouver Board of Trade and the provincial government's select standing committee on finance and government services.

Most of his audience is unaware of B.C.'s high vulnerability rate or its future cost to the economy.

They also overestimate how much Canada and the province are spending to help children during their early years.

It's something he hopes to change.

So far, there has been no firm commitment from provincial or federal governments to implement the proposed recommendations.

But Kershaw believes government has the will to invest in early childhood education and care, pointing to the implementation of full-day kindergarten this fall and a 2008 throne speech commitment to look at rolling out full-day kindergarten for three- and four-year-olds as well.

But for government to be roused to action, they need to be spurred on by taxpayers, he says.

"Politicians respond to what the citizenry is asking them to respond to, and right now, we are not up in arms about it."

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