



▶ [About Us](#)

▶ [Browse by  
Subject](#)

▶ [News Releases](#)

▶ [Programs](#)

▶ [Rural Dialogue](#)

▶ [Rural Youth](#)

▶ [Rural Teams](#)

▶ [Research](#)

▶ [Rural Lens](#)

▶ [Canadian Rural  
Information  
Service](#)

▶ [Information  
Pathfinders](#)

▼ [Publications](#)  
• [Annual Report](#)  
• [Guide to  
Programs and  
Services](#)

▶ [Events](#)

▶ [Community  
Decision-Making  
Toolkit](#)

▶ [Proactive  
Disclosure](#)

## Canadian Rural Partnership Advisory Committee on Rural Issues

# Canada's new national childcare program: Ensuring the rural message is heard

March 2005

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*The opinions expressed in this document are those of the Advisory Committee on Rural Issues and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Government of Canada.*

## Table of Contents

### Introduction

- a. [Why is this issue important to rural?](#)
- b. [How are childcare needs different for rural than for urban?](#)
- c. [Why are the differences important to public policy?](#)
- d. [What are the public policy options?](#)

### Recommendations

### Selected bibliography

### ANNEX 1—Case studies of Rural Childcare

1. [Childcare Family Access Network \(C-FAN\), Manitoba](#)
2. [Shaunavon Children's Learning Centre, Saskatchewan](#)
3. [Les petits crayons, New Brunswick](#)

### ANNEX 2—Advisory Committee on Rural

## Introduction

The government of Canada announced in the October 2004 Speech from the Throne that it will move ahead with its long-awaited national childcare program. The federal/provincial/territorial Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Childcare (March 2003) <sup>i</sup> describes the objective of the program as follows:

*"The objective of (the Early Childhood Development) Initiative is to further promote early childhood development and support the participation of parents in employment or training by improving access to affordable, quality early learning and childcare programs and services."*

In early 2005, federal, provincial and territorial ministers will meet to forge a deal for a national childcare program.

The national Advisory Committee on Rural Issues applauds this attention to a new deal for childcare and early education. In our deliberations, and from our various regions, it is clear that the development of human capital, which must start very early, is absolutely essential for a healthy and productive rural population, and vitality in the rural economy. The appropriate early childhood development program will be an important means to this end. However, we are also aware that national programs, if they are to be useful to rural populations, must be tailored to the peculiarities of the rural setting. For this reason, we strongly urge program designers to seriously consider the result of our deliberations on this very important initiative.

There is a large and growing body of literature about the value of early childhood education. The government's own document notes: *"In Canada, there is a growing consensus on the importance of the early years. What happens to children from conception to age 5 sets the stage for how they will fare in the future in all aspects of their lives."* <sup>ii</sup> Many experts maintain that an early childhood education often sets the stage for lifelong learning.

Typically, childcare has been viewed as a primarily urban phenomenon. Many have assumed that rural and remote, coastal and farm families fit a traditional model of a father working outside the home, and a mother working inside, caring for young children. But just as the labour market has changed in urban areas—with increasing numbers of women now in the workforce—the situation has also changed dramatically in rural and remote areas. Not only can few families survive on one income, but the nature of the family itself has changed, with many single-parent families having no choice but to participate in the labour market.

Young children who cannot be in the care of their family full-time deserve an equitable access to a good childcare centre, where they will acquire the knowledge and skills they will need to survive, develop and grow. Good childcare lays a foundation for learning, integration into the community, scholastic success, and eventually, the full participation of young people in community life.

But children in small town, rural and remote Canada do not have equal access to quality childcare. Good quality childcare spaces are in short supply in the country (one report <sup>iii</sup> estimated that 600,000 spaces were available in 2001 for Canada's almost five million children aged zero to 12) and the situation for particular groups and areas is even worse (i.e. rural

areas, First Nations reserves, services for infants and toddlers or children with special needs, services for parents working non-traditional hours).

**a. Why is this issue important to rural?**

This issue is important to rural for the following reasons:

- All Canadian children, whether rural or urban, deserve equal access to a quality early childhood education. A solid early education is crucial to creating and maintaining a vibrant, educated rural population. Currently, children in rural areas have much less access than those in urban, and unless their needs are considered in designing the national childcare program, this situation will continue.
- Canadian parents deserve the ability and opportunity to work, knowing that their children are safe and well cared for in a stimulating, enriched environment. Labour force participation (facilitated by access to childcare) is essential to stem rural population decline.
- Quality childcare is part of the community infrastructure essential for economic development, and population retention and attraction. Young families will not move to nor remain in locations where quality childcare is unavailable.
- Childcare centres provide employment in small town, rural and remote areas, and contribute to the local economy.
- Policy and resources are often (and usually) based on per capita allocations. Sparsely populated rural areas are disadvantaged by per capital allocations. There are economies of scale in childcare facilities (as in most things) and the smaller the facility, the higher the cost per child may be. There may not be enough local population to attain critical mass. As a result, small operations in rural areas may be relatively high cost, and a per capita allocation for childcare to these areas would buy the rural and remote population less childcare per capita than in urban centres.
- Given the different realities between urban and rural, development of a childcare program that meets the needs of rural and remote provides an opportunity for innovation. For example, there may be opportunities to link childcare with senior care, schools, community centres, etc.

**b. How are childcare needs different for rural than for urban?**

The needs for childcare in rural areas are very different from those in urban centres.

- In rural and remote Canada, economies are based largely on natural resources and employment is often seasonal. In farming, fishing and tourism industries, for example, the need for childcare fluctuates, depending on the season. Some months can be extremely busy, requiring people to work long hours; other months (i.e. winter) childcare may not be needed at all. However:
  - A Canada-wide survey conducted in 1998 (Doherty et al, 2000) found that 98.7% of childcare centres operated only Monday to Friday. Typically, these centres opened between 7:30 and 8:00 am, and 92% of

them closed by 6:00 pm. Only one per cent of the centres were open on the weekend, and less than one per cent were open after 7:00 pm

- Many studies have pointed to the fact that so-called flexible hours childcare is more expensive. Rural childcare programmes also face the unique challenges of small, scattered populations with relatively few users for any one type of service, long distances and isolation, which add to operating costs.
- Distance, remoteness and sparse populations make it less likely that neighbours or high school students from nearby schools, for example, can look after children.
- The absence of appropriate childcare is often a health and safety issue, with children exposed to dangers related to primary production sites:
  - From 1990–2000, 171 children from 0–14 years of age were victims of agricultural fatalities <sup>iv</sup>. An additional 1,849 children 0–14 years of age were hospitalized for agricultural injuries.

Just as rural and urban are not the same, all rural situations are not the same. Different rural areas will have different needs. Sensitivity to these needs, which can probably best be identified by the local population/parents, is the starting point for determining solutions.

**c. Why are the differences important to public policy?**

These differences are important to public policy because obviously a one-size-fits-all national childcare program will be inappropriate in rural areas. Policies, programs and regulations need to allow for seasonality and higher cost issues in rural areas. Because of population out-migration, rural areas may not have an available and skilled childcare workforce. Some communities may lack the necessary facilities, although in many communities buildings may be available if they are made accessible to the community (i.e. rural schools that have been closed).

**d. What are the public policy options?**

Because the needs are different, the solutions will also be different:

- The lack of critical mass in terms of population size may mean that the cost of the childcare service per child could be higher in rural than urban.
- Caregivers may need to be trained locally since it may be difficult to recruit from outside the community for these jobs, and the local labour pool may not have the requisite skills.
- Overcoming the cost of distance may require special consideration—perhaps transportation assistance or pooling is required, or innovative solutions will need to be found, such as mobile childcare facilities.
- Existing local facilities/resources should be utilized, as appropriate, to streamline the transition from daycare to school, for example. Consideration should be given to finding ways to allow communities to take over facilities not currently being used but that could be appropriate for childcare.

- While we do not advocate different childcare standards for urban and rural, we recognize that, in some instances, the strict application of national standards will preclude the appropriate rural solution, for example, imposing a wheelchair accessibility standard in a community where no one needs it. Childcare regulations vary from one province to another, with some provincial regulations specifying even the type of garbage can that must be used (i.e. the more expensive rubber ones, rather than plastic). We recommend taking a "Smart Regulation" approach to establishing national standards for childcare centres.

In conclusion, the national Advisory Committee on Rural Issues recommends that the national childcare program include a childcare strategy for rural and remote Canada. It is clear from the research that a one-size-fits-all strategy will not work.

Federal/provincial/territorial governments must acknowledge and recognize the special needs of rural communities, including seasonality and higher cost issues, the effects of small and dispersed populations on childcare needs, and labour force and infrastructure availability. At the same time, they must recognize that access to quality childcare is crucial, if rural and remote communities are to maintain or increase their populations, and that a childcare program designed to fit the needs of urban areas will not necessarily work in rural areas. Governments should encourage rural and remote communities to develop their own unique solutions.

## Recommendations

1. Recognize that rural and remote childcare may be more expensive. Develop funding formulas accordingly.
2. Ensure mechanisms are in place to consult locally (e.g. Rural Voices Network).
3. Make explicit to rural and remote citizens "what's in it for them" when the national childcare program is announced.
4. Government should continue to support research on rural and remote childcare.
5. Monitoring of implementation of the national childcare program should ensure that rural and remote can be distinguished from urban right from the beginning.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> This is currently the only policy document at the federal level dedicated to childcare, according to the Childcare Advocacy Association of Canada/L'Association canadienne pour la promotion des services de garde à l'enfance (<http://www.childcareadvocacy.ca/>) While the government of Quebec supports the general principles of the ECDI, it did not participate in developing this initiative.

<sup>ii</sup> Federal/provincial/territorial Early Childhood Development Agreement. The Well-being of Canada's Young Children. Government of Canada report, 2002.

<sup>iii</sup> Martha Friendly, Jane Beach and Michelle Turiano. Early childhood education and care in Canada 2001. Childcare Resource and Research Unit, University of Toronto, December 2002.

<sup>iv</sup> Agricultural Injuries in Canada for 1990-2000. Canadian Agricultural Injury

Surveillance Program, 2003.  
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## **ANNEX 1—Case studies of rural childcare**

The following two examples are taken from "Rural Treasures: A Guide to Rural Child Care Programs and Resources in Manitoba and Saskatchewan." Sponsored by Childcare Family Access Network, Langruth, Manitoba for Rural Voices.

### **1. Childcare Family Access Network (C-FAN), Manitoba**

Program Description: C-FAN is a rural integrated hub model delivering childcare programs in the six Manitoba communities of Langruth, Plumas, Amaranth, Alonsa, McCreary and Laurier. These programs range from full-time multi-age childcare programs with an integrated nursery school, to weekly nursery school programs, to parent/child programs. The service provided is developed in accordance with community need.

Challenges Overcome: These are several challenges to building a childcare program in communities of less than 100 persons. There

was little experience with quality childcare or licensing regulations. Farming is the main industry and the viewpoint often was "Children have been raised here for generations—I survived so why should my kids need a daycare?"

- The need to include potential growth in the community when building—we built too small at the beginning and had to expand.
- Working with untrained staff—it is expensive and time consuming to take night courses and trained Early Childhood Educators (ECE) don't often move to small communities.
- C-FAN provided multi-age care long before it was an accepted practice.

#### Best Practices:

- C-FAN built childcare programs where the public said they couldn't be built.
- Have mentored other communities to build childcare programs in other small communities.
- Solicited support from the agricultural corporate sector.
- C-FAN believes that rural children should have high quality childcare—it may be delivered differently but every child has the right to be safe and in a caring, fun environment.
- Promotion of education—all staff are expected to do professional development annually and work towards their ECE II.

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<http://cfan.cimnet.ca/cim/85C128.dhtm>

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## 2. **Shaunavon Children's Learning Centre (SCLC), Saskatchewan**

Program Description: SCLC is a licensed childcare program for 51 children. It offers on-farm care during busy seasons. The children are transported to a central farm from several homes and cared for by an early childhood educator. They also offer extended hour and weekend care at the centre. This may be the first program (or one of the first) to offer childcare on the family farm.

#### Challenges Overcome:

- Staffing is always a challenge—they feel here that better wages would keep staff.
- Extended hours are hard to staff.
- The full-time staff rotate doing weekend care.
- Space—began in a hall (1995), bought and renovated a house (1998), built a new building (2003).
- No staff to meet community need for after school care in local



school—program could not run.

This program started in 1995 with three children. In 1998, it was licensed for 36, and by 2003, was licensed for 51 children from infants through school age. The new space has areas to meet the developmental needs of the children; it was specifically designed for them. The centre works with the school to discuss a consistent plan for a child having difficulty—the resource teacher, the parent, the early childhood educator and the childcare consultant all participate in the meeting. Ag-Rep offices have parent handbooks in order that parents can access information for the on-farm care registration. Town council is supportive via tax breaks and putting SCLC on its web-site. The centre is looking for corporate sponsorship for new and additional programs.

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The third example is taken from a summary prepared by Lucie Gosselin of the Kent Family Resource Centre for a visit by the Advisory Committee on Rural Issues to Les petits crayons at Grande-Digue, New Brunswick in October 2003.

### 3. **Les petits crayons, New Brunswick**

Program Description: Les petits crayons is a family literacy club for parents and preschoolers. It was launched in fall 2000 by the Kent Family Resource Centre in New Brunswick. The activities are similar to those in many kindergarten classrooms: circle time, crafts, snacks, games, songs, reading, etc. The difference is that here the parents lead the activities. They prepare the crafts, read the stories and plan the games, and this is what makes this project original.

Since September 2001, parents from the communities of Grande-Digue, St-Paul and Pointe-Sapin have assumed responsibility for the management and coordination of their clubs, while continuing to receive the assistance of Kent Family Resource Centre workers in planning activities, whenever such assistance is required.

Success factors:

- Identification of parent leaders
- Community resources (school, church, etc.)
- Partnership with community organizations (church, seniors' club, school, credit union, etc.)
- Culture of mutual assistance already established in the community
- Parents' full support over a minimum one-year period (September to June)
- Assistance for parents and coordination of activities in support of the club's parents' committee (preparation of meetings, recruitment and training of new parents, planning of special activities, etc.)

Barriers to success:

- Parents' lack of commitment
- Lack of community (local) resources
- Difficulty experienced by parents in bringing and training new parents on their own

The success of *Les petits crayons* in three rural communities in the Kent area has generated considerable interest among early childhood workers, because the program is a simple, inexpensive family intervention model that, in addition to preparing children for school, encourages the development of leadership skills among parents.

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## **ANNEX 2—Advisory Committee on Rural Issues: List of Members, March 2005**

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 Executive Director, Rural Secretariat



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