

## COMMUNITY PROSPERITY IT'S UP TO US

Niagara's long-term prosperity depends upon the diversity and competitiveness of its industries and businesses. As citizens, we're not just dependent upon prosperity for our quality of life, but responsible for creating it. Part of that responsibility is preparing our children to meet whatever challenges lie ahead.

Continually maintaining and enhancing our school system is a key part of the equation, but so is ensuring that our children enter school ready to take full advantage of all that the school system has to offer. According to the *1995 World Bank Report*, ensuring that children enter school ready to learn is one of the best investments a nation can make. The evidence is so compelling that governments around the globe are studying children's readiness to learn and how it can be optimized.

### What's at stake?

What a growing number of governments, including Canada's, now know is that a child's first few years at school create a framework for that child's success later in life. A good start increases the likelihood that a child will reach his or her full potential and enter adulthood with a strong sense of self-respect; a healthy concern for others; suitable literacy, numerical and problem-solving skills; and a lifelong interest in learning. If Canada is to thrive in a global economy, it needs to act now to create a ready supply of adults with these qualities in the years to come.

### What's being done?

The Government of Canada acknowledged the importance of the early years when it launched *Understanding the Early Years* (UEY), a Social Development Canada (SDC) research project, involving 12 communities across the country, including the city of Niagara Falls. UEY provides communities with information to enable them to make informed decisions about the best policies and most appropriate programs for families with young children.

The information gathered as part of UEY in Niagara Falls has helped:

- assess children's readiness to learn upon school entry;
- highlight some of the community factors that influence early childhood development; and
- create the knowledge base for action planning.

### Understanding readiness to learn

Children who enter school ready to learn are prepared to take advantage of the academic and social opportunities that school presents. Children who enter school ready to learn are also more likely to complete high school and to find employment. Children who lack this advantage are more likely to repeat a grade, to rely on special education services, or to abandon their schooling before they graduate from high school. It is typical for children who eventually drop out of high school to show academic difficulties and perform poorly on achievement tests as early as grade three.

Given the very serious consequences a widespread lack of readiness to learn can have for a community and for the nation as a whole, having standardized tools to measure school readiness is critical. The Early Development Instrument (EDI) provides just such a tool. The EDI assesses five general areas of child development:

- 1 physical health
- 2 social competence
- 3 emotional maturity
- 4 language & cognitive development
- 5 communications skills & general knowledge

### What community factors influence children's readiness to learn?

Research suggests that neighbourhoods and communities where children grow and learn

directly influence their development, because they affect parents' ability to provide the best possible family environment and the ability of schools to offer the best possible education.

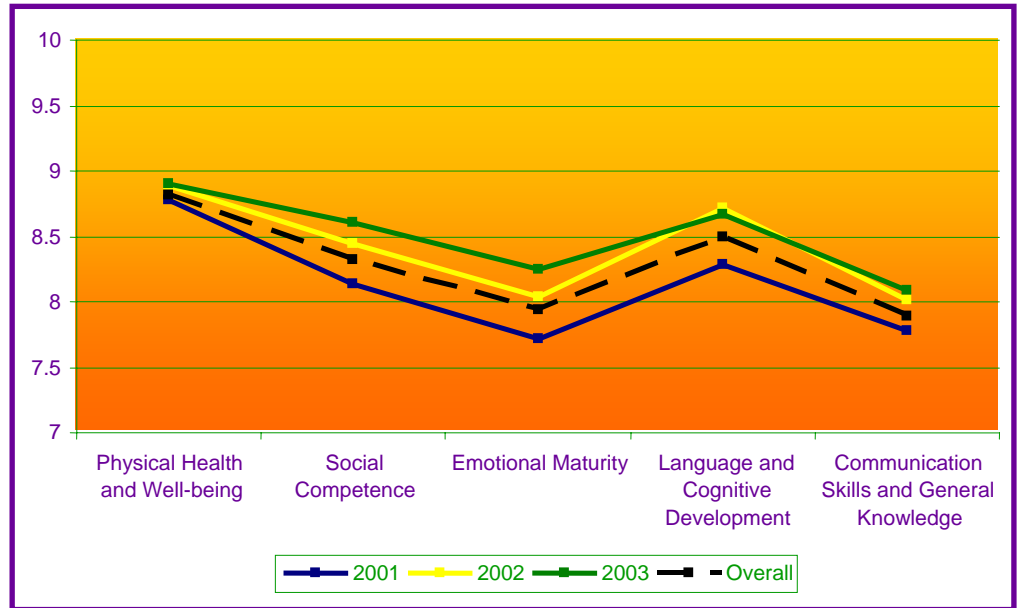
### How are Niagara's children doing?

Based on data collected in 2003 -- in other words, the children who started first grade classes in the fall of 2004 -- the EDI findings were as follows:

- In Niagara as a whole, the percentage of children who experienced difficulty in two or more areas of school readiness ranged from 6% to 21%
- In Niagara Falls, 24% of senior kindergarten students experienced difficulty in one of the five key areas of school readiness
- Physical health is an area of strength for all of Niagara's children
- Areas where there may be a need for greater support are emotional maturity and communication skills & general knowledge
- Children who attended at least part-time preschool scored higher on the EDI than those who did not. The difference was consistent in all areas except emotional maturity and social competence
- In all five areas of child development, those who attended Junior Kindergarten scored significantly higher than those who did not



In Niagara Falls, a pattern has emerged. Overall, children's scores have been relatively low in the areas of emotional maturity and communication & general knowledge, but relatively high in physical health & well-being; social competence; and language & cognitive development. Across the three years of EDI data collection, children's scores showed a slight increase. According to the developers of the EDI, an increase in scores over subsequent implementations is a common occurrence and may be due to factors such as teacher familiarity with the instrument, rather than any substantial change in children's developmental outcomes.



## Early Years Investments Yield Big Returns

A child's brain development in the first six years of life sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, and health.

For every \$1 spent on child care there is a \$2 economic benefit. The benefit comes back through increased tax revenues, and decreased social, education, and health costs.

### How you can take action

Niagara's businesses and industries have a major financial stake in the long-term development of Niagara's workforce. With a small cohort of children to replace the workers who will retire over the next two decades, it's more important than ever that our human capital be fully developed. One of the keys to Niagara's continued prosperity will be to optimize the productivity of our shrinking labour force by ensuring that every child enters school ready to learn. Some of the ways Niagara's businesses and industries currently promote children's readiness to learn include:

#### Helping Expand Access to Child Care

It's estimated that work-life conflicts cost Canadian organizations roughly \$2.7 billion in lost time due to work absences, but this figure does not include indirect costs such as replacement of the employee during the absence, overtime costs, or reduced service or productivity. Some of the benefits employers reap from helping their employees avoid child care breakdown include:

- lower employee turnover;
- reduced tardiness and absenteeism;
- higher employee morale and commitment;
- lower training and recruitment costs; and
- increased employee productivity and performance.

#### Supporting Initiatives That Promote Early Learning

Contributing financial and material resources to community initiatives that make a difference to children and families helps ensure the success of vital programs such as those aimed at early literacy, as well as after-school activities, and family recreational opportunities such as those offered by libraries and community centres. This kind of support isn't just good for children; it's good for business. Strong promotion of such efforts can play a major role in consumer and employee loyalty.

#### Getting Involved

In addition to exceptional planning and implementation skills, many of Niagara's business leaders have had the experience of working with suppliers and customers across the country and around the world. They know first-hand what global competitiveness looks like and are uniquely qualified to help our community achieve it. Every day, business leaders lend their skills as volunteers to support community organizations, events and activities aimed at helping children learn.

To find out more about Understanding the Early Years, to arrange a presentation customized for your group, or to obtain a copy of the latest report, please contact:

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