

POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGIES

A Canadian Teachers' Federation Brief submitted to the
Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development
and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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Canadian Teachers' Federation
Fédération canadienne des enseignantes et des enseignants

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Founded in 1920, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) is a national alliance of provincial and territorial teacher organizations that represent nearly 231,000 elementary and secondary school teachers across Canada. CTF is also a member of the international body of teachers, Education International.

A generation of Canadian children has grown up in poverty since the 1989 all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada, as well as the signing into international law of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – and still we wait. According to the most recent Campaign 2000 report card, child and family poverty is higher now than it was in 1989 when the resolution was passed – 1,334,930 children (19%) lived in poverty in 2013, up from 1,066,150 children (15.8%) in 1989.

Among other negative impacts, poverty interferes with student learning and development. Many low-income children and youth experience reduced motivation to learn, delayed cognitive development, lower achievement, limited participation in extra-curricular activities, lower career aspirations, interrupted school attendance, lower university attendance, an increased risk of illiteracy, and higher drop-out rates than other children and youth. (Hess, 1989)

Journalist André Picard notes that, "children born to low-income parents are twice as likely to end up in special education classes and three times more likely to suffer mental health problems than those in the highest income group. They're also twice as likely to drop out before completing high school."

Certain vulnerable groups continue to experience higher levels of poverty than others, including: Indigenous peoples, recent immigrants, racialized communities, female lone-parent families, and persons with disabilities.

CTF believes that addressing poverty is fundamentally a human rights issue. The United Nations (UN) notes that a human rights-based approach to tackling poverty recognizes that in addition to a lack of economic and material resources, poverty also contributes to social exclusion and is a violation of basic human dignity.

Nelson Mandela once stated that, "Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life." In addition, the economic and social costs of not addressing poverty run into the billions of dollars annually. A 2011 report from the National Council of Welfare stated that poverty costs taxpayers \$24-billion each year. The cost of addressing the root cause of poverty would be significantly less.

As Campaign 2000 has demonstrated, the positive impact of public investments in the form of government transfer payments in reducing the child poverty rate is significant.

The federal government has a critically important role to play in poverty reduction. The Dignity for All Campaign's *National Anti-Poverty Plan for Canada*, explains the rationale for strong federal leadership in reducing and ultimately eliminating poverty. The following is excerpted from the report:

The task of eliminating poverty requires all levels of government to work collaboratively and in concert alongside other sectors. In this regard, the federal government has a fundamental and unique role to play. As the signatory of international human rights treaties committing Canada to uphold human rights including the right to an adequate standard of living, the federal government itself must meet certain obligations and must show leadership. Moreover, the federal government is uniquely placed to address poverty nationally in light of the role it plays with respect to:

- Income security programs (e.g., Canada Child Tax Benefit, GST Tax Credit, Working Income Tax Benefit, and Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors); [Over 80% of all spending on income security programs comes from the federal government.]

- Programs and services designed to economically assist Inuit, First Nations, and Métis peoples, newcomers, and persons with disabilities; and
- Federal transfers to the provinces and territories under programs such as the Canada Social Transfer and Affordable Housing Agreements.

The federal government also plays an essential role with respect to revenue, ensuring, for example, the fair and progressive taxation of individuals and businesses. Tax policy is a key component of an effective anti-poverty plan as it is a vehicle through which government can generate sufficient revenues to support vibrant and effective public programs in ways that equitably distribute the costs.

The federal government must link with poverty reduction efforts across all levels of government (while navigating provincial/territorial distinctions) and across the federal government itself, leveraging collective knowledge and action to maximum effect. In a highly decentralized federation such as Canada, achieving success demands strong relationships between governments. This includes meaningful consultation and liaising with provinces and territories. (Page 8)

We firmly believe the time has come for strong federal leadership on this issue. There is much the federal government can do to reduce child poverty in Canada. In this regard, CTF has six recommendations.

In order to provide for a consistent voice on behalf of children and youth at the federal level, CTF recommends:

That the Government establish a Federal Ministry of Child and Youth Services, to harmonize policy and the provision of services with a wide range of stakeholders to improve outcomes for children, youth and families.

In budget 2016, the Government announced the creation of the Canada Child Benefit (CCB). CTF congratulates this move as it immediately reduces child poverty by 25%. Unfortunately, according to the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO)¹, the lack of indexation of the benefit coupled with static income thresholds will mean that, over time, fewer people will get a smaller benefit. According to the PBO, “the value of CCB payments will decrease over time. By 2024-25, total CCB payments will fall slightly below those of the projected value of the old system of children’s benefits.”²

In order to maintain the current benefit levels, CTF proposes:

That the Canada Child Benefit amount and income thresholds be fully indexed.

CTF also congratulates the government on its stated plan to move forward with the Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy. The government’s continued commitment to broad consultation will ensure that a national strategy will be developed in collaboration with multiple levels of government as well as Indigenous governments and organizations, civil society organizations and people with lived experience of poverty.

Two of the areas for consideration by the Committee are concerning. A focus on government administered savings benefit those with higher incomes. We believe the Committee should include income replacement program like Employment Insurance rather than savings programs unreachable for many living in poverty. CTF is very concerned with the perceived direction taken by the Committee regarding education and training. The consultation document asks for comments implying that there should be a direct connection between education and training for the workplace and with a better connection, poverty will be reduced. We believe this is a false relationship.

¹ www.pbo-dpb.gc.ca/web/default/files/Documents/Reports/2016/CCB/CCB_EN.pdf.

² Ibid., page 10.

According to the OECD report entitled *OECD Skills Outlook 2015*³, Canadian youth employability skills are average or above average (top 25%) in all of the indicators. This means that Canadian youth are well positioned for involvement in an evolving workplace that, according to the OECD, will increasingly require highly skilled workers.

One of the purposes of the education system is to provide a fundamental set of skills that, combined with specific employer training, permits successful engagement and participation in a successful, ongoing career path. Schools cannot and should not be participating in job training. They should, and do, provide opportunities for students to experience various career paths and explore various subject areas. To that end, school curricula across the country cover traditional topics such as mathematics, the arts and languages, but also subjects like engineering, entrepreneurship, and design. These are paired with programs such as cooperative education aimed at providing direct links to possible career pathways – not job training, but preparation for employment. Unfortunately, in recent years, narrowed curriculum priorities have reduced opportunities for students to participate in these programs.

It has been said that the education system is preparing students for jobs that do not yet exist using technology yet to be invented to solve problems not yet envisioned. Skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and research are essential as they are transferable in any career path. Among the ranks of sitting MPs, for example, are people educated as teachers, lawyers, entrepreneurs and sociologists. All, we posit, would affirm that they are better at their work because of their education, even though it may not be directly related.

Student success in school is, however, impacted by factors outside of the school's control. Included in these factors are the availability of consistent housing and food and the availability of readily accessible social service supports. Children living in poverty may have poor outcomes in school because they have unstable housing, are hungry and/or unable to access services like mental health supports.

CTF research, conducted in 2010⁴, found that almost six in ten educators indicated that their school has a free breakfast or lunch program. Seven in ten educators at the secondary level reported that their school had such programs compared to about half of those in elementary schools. While this is a good start, the inconsistent presence of meal programs across the country is a problem.

Budget 2016 announce \$1.481 billion over two years in funding for affordable housing. CTF believes that stable, affordable housing is one of the key determinants of school success. As such, we congratulate the government for this initiative. According to the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association⁵, there are currently “tens of thousands of households on city waiting lists – and tens of thousands of units needing urgent repairs to be livable.” The government's Affordable Rental Innovation Fund first announced in the 2016 federal Budget, intended to create up to 4,000 new affordable rental units in the next 5 years falls significantly short of the need. Unfortunately, the funding announced in budget 2016 does not go far enough to solving a problem created by 25 years of underfunding.

In order to remove these barriers, CTF recommends:

That the Government of Canada immediately establish a new federal transfer payment to provinces and territories directed at poverty alleviation. This transfer must be designed to assist provinces and territories to meet the specific poverty reduction targets set in the federal poverty reduction strategy.

That prior to 2020, the Government of Canada establish a national school lunch program including subsidies for students in need.

³ www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oced/education/oced-skills-outlook-2015_9789264234178-en#page28.

⁴ www.ctf-fce.ca/Research-Library/PF2010_presentation_Mary-Lou-Donnelly.pdf.

⁵ <http://chra-achru.ca/en/advocacy>.

That Prior to 2025, the Government of Canada ensure that there is high-quality supported and affordable housing for those in need.

Anyone following the news of late has heard stories of school boards being forced to close existing schools due to declining enrolments leading to excess pupil spaces. As the federal government is examining planning and infrastructure, empty school space could provide opportunities. Most children spend 7 or 8 hours of their day at school either in class or participating in extra-curricular activities. By encouraging provinces and territories to make use of surplus buildings or even parts of buildings, services could potentially be delivered in the same location or in the same neighbourhood where children spend most of their time. Schools should be designed or retrofitted to house other social services right in the community. This type of innovation would save on physical infrastructure costs, potentially provide new revenue streams to school boards and, most importantly, provide ready access for students to services they need. In this regard, CTF recommends:

That \$350 million be directed to provincial/territorial governments to fund grassroots initiatives that partner schools and community organizations in promoting/fostering services for children and youth including mental health services.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

CTF recommends:

1. That the Government establish a Federal Ministry of Child and Youth Services, to harmonize policy and the provision of services with a wide range of stakeholders to improve outcomes for children, youth and families.
2. That the Canada Child Benefit amount and income thresholds be fully indexed.
3. That the Government of Canada immediately establish a new federal transfer payment to provinces and territories directed at poverty alleviation. This transfer must be designed to assist provinces and territories to meet the specific poverty reduction targets set in the federal poverty reduction strategy.
4. That prior to 2020, the Government of Canada establish a national school lunch program including subsidies for students in need.
5. That prior to 2025, the Government of Canada ensure that there is high-quality supported and affordable housing for those in need.
6. That \$350 million be directed to provincial/territorial governments to fund grassroots initiatives that partner schools and community organizations in promoting/fostering services for children and youth including mental health services.