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WELCOME MESSAGE

Judith Maxwell

Canadians are generous in their gifts to food banks, yet they have not yet mobilized against the root causes of hunger. It is my hope that the students leading the Esurio enterprise will be the spark that will mobilize a broad cross-section of Ontarians to address the root causes of hunger and poverty in our communities.

Here is an example of how well-presented research can influence public policy. In December, UNICEF ranked Canada last among 25 of the world's advanced economies in the care and education of its children in a study called *The Child Care Transition*.

What a claim to fame!

This is not a surprise to an aging policy wonk like me. But it is still shocking that a country which puts a high priority on fairness would be so negligent of its youngest citizens and so blind to the fact that 28% of six year olds are not ready to learn. (J. Douglas Willms, *Vulnerable Children*, 2002)

Vulnerable children are found in rich and poor families alike, although the rate of vulnerability is higher in poor families (37%) than in rich ones (24%). They are missing key cognitive or behavioural skills that enable them to successful in school. Willms says, "What matters most is that a child is cared for throughout the day by warm and responsive caregivers, in an environment rich with opportunities to learn." (p. 350)
For 20 years, governments in Canada have been moving one step forward and two steps back on early learning and care policies. They have been blocked by arguments over cost, jurisdiction and how the care should be delivered, but mostly they have been thwarted by a conflict in values.

In our heads, we know that the majority of mothers with young children work full time (75% in fact), and in our hearts we believe that mothers should be at home with their children. Other countries have faced up to this contradiction and found ways to meet the needs of children and families. Canada has not – at least not yet. That why we are ranked 25th.

What the UNICEF report found in its summary of recent neuroscience findings is a clear distinction between the needs of children under three and those aged three to six.

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The younger group are better served if they are cared for by a parent. For the older group, however, organized child care "becomes an unequivocal benefit."

The conclusion that I would draw from this finding is that governments need more than one policy tool. They should give parents the choice of staying home with their young children by a) extending parental leave from the current 12 months to 24 months, and b) enriching the National Child Benefit to recognize that there are real economic sacrifices in staying home. (These are federal responsibilities.)

At the same time, the provinces, which are responsible for education and child care services, should extend public education to four- and five-year olds so that they have access to full-day learning and care. Ontario has just committed to making this happen.
A policy package like this will reduce poverty in the short-term (by enabling parents to earn more income) and prevent poverty in the long-term (by enabling children to be successful at school and go on to earn a decent income).

Implementing these policies in a recession is also an excellent tool for stimulating the economy.

I cite this example of how research can stimulate changes in public policy because it provides a model for Esurio, the new on-line Ontario Journal on Hunger and Poverty.
The major contributions to knowledge in the UNICEF study are a) an excellent summary of recent findings in neuroscience – findings that should influence governments' strategy for family policies; b) a careful effort to compile evidence on what countries are doing with respect to early learning and care; and c) a new set of benchmarks by which to rank the well-performing countries.

It's clear that doing a study for 25 countries is ambitious and well beyond the reach of Esurio. But the research strategy can be just as effective on a smaller scale here in Ontario. And the technique can be applied in many of the public policy arenas relevant to hunger and poverty which Esurio plans to address.

Launching a new journal at the beginning of a recession may seem daunting. But there is now a desperate need for new ideas and shared learning across society. I see this as an age of discontinuity, a time when people are forced to confront their misconceptions and when new ideas and new ways of framing the issue can have influence. Just as General Motors has to rethink the way it will do business, so do governments, business, and the nonprofit sector.

Esurio is designed to nurture the next generation of policy wonks and to stimulate commentary by first class minds in universities, politics and the food banks. As the students gain new skills as critical thinkers and "connected knowers," they will soon be in a position to influence the lives of fellow citizens.

My congratulations and best wishes to you all.