

Open Letter to Decision-Makers in the Education Sector

Children have a right to an education that develops their full potential and prepares them for all aspects of life. In addition, decisions about re-opening schools need to consider the full range of children's rights, which are partially realized through the education system. These include the right to protection from violence, freedom of thought, access to information, the right to play, access to social support, and many others. Schools are "critical infrastructure" for realizing these rights.

Governments have a duty to make the best interests of children a top priority and create conditions in which children can realize their rights. An education re-opening strategy based on children's rights would provide sound direction, public confidence, and better tools to deal with unexpected challenges.

The current piecemeal approach to decision-making, driven by other priorities, leaves gaps that add risks for children. The current approach is also failing to earn the broad public confidence that young people need to see in a time of crisis. Meanwhile, other jurisdictions, such as New Zealand, are showing that children's right to education can be met with a thoughtful, measured approach to re-opening schools.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Canada ratified 30 years ago, could provide a useful framework for transitioning from the short-term emergency response to COVID-19 to a more sustainable, low-risk approach that gives priority to developing the full potential of our children.

Giving the best interests of children top priority means two things:

- a. Realizing the rights of our children becomes the primary objective of re-opening strategies. Other facets of re-opening, such as re-opening stores, bars, and services for adults will include consideration of their impacts on our ability to maintain children's rights. That includes access to formal education, care, space for play, and social relationships.
- b. Children are at the center of decision-making for education, with evidence-based inputs from all areas of child development, such as health, learning, parenting, child protection, and play. It gives serious consideration to the views of children in developing policies and practices that account for the full diversity of children and their contexts. So far, the voices of children and youth have been largely absent from discussions about the re-opening of schools.

Areas of Focus for Forward-Moving Decisions:

Learning

Children learn in many ways. Access to a rich variety of learning resources, with support and direction by adults who respect children as active agents in their own learning, can come in various modes. Teachers, education specialists, and children themselves can collaborate to find what works for children in various circumstances. Investing now in child-centered learning resources could lead to a post-COVID education system that better meets the needs of all children than the pre-COVID system did.

Making these changes now could also address systemic inequalities faced by some children who routinely have their right to education violated, such as First Nations children and children in racial minority groups.

Developmental Approach

Child-centered approaches will be age-appropriate, responsive to developmental stages, and respect the uniqueness and social agency of each child, rather than one-size-fits-all. From infancy, when there is high dependence on adults, to adolescence with greater adult-child interdependence, the Convention spans from protection of vulnerabilities and respect for the evolving capacities of young people to share in making decisions about how they can best learn and live.

Emotional and Mental Health, as well as Physical Health

The right to health in the Convention focuses on creating an environment that supports children's emotional, mental, and physical development, including access to community health services. Early results of family surveys during COVID-19 show high levels of concern about children's stress levels, anxieties, and strains on relationships within the family home. A longer-term, sustainable strategy for dealing with the threat of viruses needs to be based on a holistic approach to assessing the various risks to healthy child development.

Social Connections

Children develop through peer-relationships and the support of adults outside their family, as well as through supportive parents/carers. Schools and local communities provide a wider social network of support for children. The Convention places a high priority on access to community resources. Finding ways to provide those networks for children while keeping everyone safe needs to be part of a child-centered re-opening strategy.

Play

The right to play, Article 31 in the Convention, is fundamental for healthy child development and wellbeing. Opportunities for creative, explorative, child-led play, with due attention to safety, is an essential component for a more sustainable plan. Schools provide access to spaces for indoor and outdoor play for many children.

Child Protection

Safety for children includes managing the risk of catching or spreading a virus; it equally includes freedom from all forms of violence and exploitation at home, on local streets, and in schools. There is mounting evidence of increased exposure to child abuse and intimate partner violence due to Covid-19. Schools and community programs are a primary avenue for supporting children at risk. Children have the right to school environments that protect them from exposure to violence at home and from exposure to COVID-19 and violence at school.

Food Security

For some children, school breakfasts and/or lunches are essential for adequate nutrition. Whatever form education takes, attention needs to be paid to ensuring that every child has adequate nutrition for healthy development.

Equity and Inclusion

The pandemic has highlighted and amplified existing inequalities in society. Racialized communities and families living in poverty have been hardest hit by COVID-19, and they remain most vulnerable to the long-term impacts. Public schools can be a powerful force for equity, especially when anti-racism and anti-oppression activities are incorporated into the school experience.

Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities have a "right to special care, education, and training designed to help them achieve the greatest possible self-reliance and to lead a full active life in society" (Convention Article 23). Whatever the mix of policies and modes of education, measures are needed to ensure that children with special needs can also learn, develop their potential, and participate in society.

Monitoring and Public Accountability

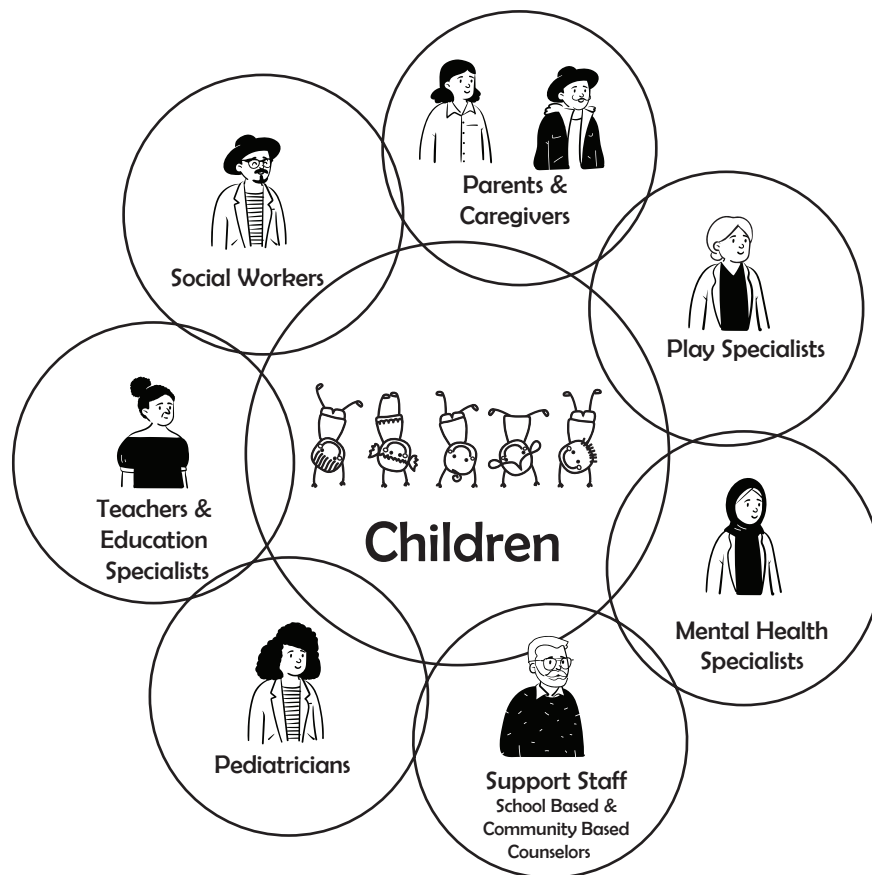
The Convention includes monitoring outcomes and public accountability for all areas of child development. Such mechanisms would make a transition education strategy able to respond to changing circumstances.

Circles of Support

It is often said “it takes a village to raise a child.” It is equally true that children create a village. It is important to listen to parents and consider economic impacts; it is equally important to consider all areas of child development and children’s rights. Putting children at the center of this dialogue has the potential to create supportive networks that are more resilient. They will also be better able to handle the inevitable challenges in the next stages of dealing with COVID-19. Developing such collaborative networks will benefit children and Canadian society in the present context and for the longer-term.

Multiple perspectives will result in the best approaches to fulfill children’s rights to education and healthy development and provide circles of support to adjust as circumstances change.

“We are in this together” applies to realizing children’s rights as well as effectively dealing with viruses.



Statistics Canada. Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians – Parenting During the Pandemic.
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200709/dq200709a-eng.htm>.