

## Early learning is a better bargain than universities: Goar

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DREAMSTIME Young learners' brains are more receptive than they'll ever be.

There is a familiar, forlorn quality to the [report](#) on early childhood education just released by TD Bank.

Like studies dating back to the 1980s, it lays out the social and economic benefits of giving children a strong start in life. It demonstrates that the benefits outweigh the costs. And it laments that Canada invests less in early learning than any other industrialized country.

But the bank's chief economist, [Craig Alexander](#), offers no solution. The closest he comes is a cautious suggestion: "While governments are in no position to take on new spending programs at the moment, over the medium term, they might consider focusing more attention on improving the early childhood education system."

That means at least five more years of paralysis. It means preschool learning will languish at the bottom of policy-makers' priority lists. It means no one will have to think about making trade-offs to improve Canada's sorry record.

At the risk of precipitating apoplexy in the halls of academe, I'll make a specific proposal: Take \$3 billion out of universities and put it in early childhood education.

Canada now spends \$8.7 billion (\$7.5 billion provincially, \$1.2 billion federally) on early childhood education. It devotes almost five times that much to post-secondary education. Let's compare the benefits.

Policy-makers consider it an article of faith that every student in Canada has the right to go to university. Undergraduate enrolment has doubled since 1980. We've built eight new public universities.

Universal access to post-secondary education is a fine principle. But it isn't delivering the desired outcome. Many employers now require a university degree for entry-level clerical, retail and blue-collar jobs.

This credential inflation has reduced the market value of a BA. Graduates who want a shot at a good job need an MA or doctorate — obtained at great expense to themselves, their parents and taxpayers.

We now have the most highly educated generation in our history. But they are trained for jobs that aren't available or require practical skills they don't have. Graduates are debt-burdened and disillusioned. Businesses can't find job-ready employees. And taxpayers are getting a disappointing return on their investment.

Now let's look at early childhood education (ECE). Most politicians — outside Quebec — consider it unaffordable.

- Preschoolers learn at a prodigious rate. Their brains are more receptive than they'll ever be. They can be taught to control aggression and persevere despite setbacks. What they learn during this period of rapid brain development sticks, making them less likely to be bullies or dropouts.
- With ECE, everybody starts school on an even footing. Less privileged children don't have to spend the rest of their lives trying to catch up.
- Mothers can participate in the workforce, knowing their children are in a safe, stimulating environment. Family incomes rise.
- More youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds acquire the skills and discipline to become productive workers and citizens. This reduces the cost of social assistance, health care, law enforcement and incarceration.

"The benefits of early childhood education far outweigh the costs," Alexander says. He estimates that every dollar spent produces \$1.50 to \$3 in benefits.

Daniel Treffler, [Canada Research Chair in Competitiveness and Prosperity](#) at the University of Toronto, calculates the payback at \$10 to \$16 per dollar spent. "Where in the market do you get an ROI (return on investment) like that?" he asks business audiences.

There are parents who refuse to place their toddlers in "institutionalized child care" and politicians who equate early learning with babysitting. But their beliefs are rooted in ideology, not neuroscience or an understanding of the nation's economic needs.

Is the cost of early childhood education prohibitive? Only if we accept that every existing expenditure is untouchable.

**Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.**