

Advocate responds to the release of Saskatchewan's Early Years Plan May 27, 2016

SASKATOON – Earlier this month, Education Minister Don Morgan formally released *Saskatchewan's Early Years Plan 2016-20: A roadmap for a brighter path for children and families*. The Advocate for Children and Youth, Bob Pringle, has been calling on the provincial government to develop and implement a strategy such as this for some time, most recently in his *2015 Annual Report*. He applauds the plan's vision of making Saskatchewan the best place in Canada to raise children, adding that "of course I'd be even happier if this vision included making Saskatchewan the best place in Canada for children and youth to live."

The Early Years Plan sets out a sound rationale for supporting children through their early years (defined as prenatal to age eight) and outlines five high-level goals and associated actions to be pursued over the coming half-decade. The goals include: healthy beginnings; early learning; child care; strong families and healthy children; and community planning and alignment. "This plan is a significant step towards ensuring that all Saskatchewan children are safe, healthy and develop to their full potential in strong families and supportive communities," Pringle said.

"First of all, I'd like to express my appreciation to officials from several ministries – Education, Health, Justice, Social Services and Intergovernmental Relations – for their thoughtful contributions to *The Early Years Plan*, and to their respective Ministers for supporting the public release of this important document," Pringle said. "If properly funded, skillfully implemented and carefully monitored, this *Early Years Plan* has the makings of an excellent early childhood development strategy for this province."

Several proposed actions in the plan address longstanding calls from the Advocate for more attention to prevention and trauma-informed practice. For example, the specialized supports for children and family are to include strengthened services for families at risk of involvement with child protection, and ensuring that the new *Child and Family Services Act* enhances the ability of the province to offer preventative services to children at risk of abuse or neglect.

Mr. Pringle is disappointed that the plan's proposed actions are often short on specifics, timelines and concrete programs and initiatives. It is suggested that the plan is informed by the Saskatchewan Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan and the Saskatchewan Disability Strategy as well as a fall 2014 consultation on Early Learning led by then Education Legislative Secretary Russ Marchuk.

"While this is undoubtedly the case," Pringle noted, "there are no actions to address child poverty, particularly among Indigenous children. Nor is there any mention of food security or improving children's access to mental health services. On the other hand, we are pleased that making it easier for new mothers to find support for their mental health is a priority, as is social housing for families with children under the age of eight, and addressing the trauma that accompanies family violence."

Throughout his tenure, Pringle has focused on improving outcomes for children and youth, and the need to address the factors that put them at risk – poverty and its related conditions, mental illness, violence, addictions, racism, the legacy of colonialism and residential schools, and disabilities.

“I look forward to learning more in the coming weeks about how the province intends to fund and implement this plan and track its impact on the well-being of Saskatchewan children and youth,” Pringle said. “We will continue to champion concrete action that advances the rights of children and youth, and in so doing, contributes to their well-being.”

The Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent officer of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan. He leads a team of advocates, investigators and other staff who work on behalf of the province's young people. Our vision is that the rights, interests and well-being of children and youth are respected and valued in our communities and in government legislation, policy, programs, and practice.

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