

1998 Report to the Members of the Laidlaw Foundation*

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The past year has been one of reconstruction and evolution as Laidlaw Foundation continues to be an innovator, inspiration and leader in Canadian philanthropy.

In 1990 the Foundation's Directors approved a new direction for its abiding commitment to child development through a multi-year \$5,000,000 strategic Children at Risk Programme. This initiative sought to advance the wellbeing of children, youth and families in Canada through collaboration and conceptual integration of research, social practice, and policy. This ambitious program was the first of its kind undertaken by a foundation in Canada and, according to an external evaluation, has transformed the role of private foundation philanthropy.

At a symposium held in October 1997 the Children at Risk Programme was formally ended but the wellbeing of children and youth will remain central to the Foundation's public interest work. The "life chances" of children and youth continue to be the guiding perspective.

The Foundation's current focus on young people began in the Summer of 1995 with a series of focus group meetings with young people, the circulation of a draft discussion paper on "Creating a New Social Mission for the Laidlaw Foundation" (September 1996), and the appointment of a part-time co-ordinator for a youth-engagement initiative. In May 1997 the Nominations Committee put forward the names of two youth members (university students) to join the Board and assist the Foundation to develop its commitment to youth development.

In 1998 the former Children at Risk Programme budget of \$1 million was divided. Fifty percent was dedicated to maintaining Foundation commitments

*This article was developed from the Administrator's Annual Report in which he included a thought-provoking outline of the Foundation's proposed "Youth Engagement Programme Initiative", successor to the successful programs for "Children at Risk" initiated in 1990.

in areas related to the wellbeing of children. The other 50 per cent was directed to a new “Youth Engagement Programme”.

Why a Youth Focus?

The Laidlaw Foundation tradition has been somewhat iconoclastic. Generally, it does not opt for the popular sentiment or follow the pack. Currently, public, corporate, private and government funding is focused on early childhood development. “Success by Six”, the “First Two Years of Life”, “Best Start”, “School Readiness” are all programs that build on recent neuro-biological research on brain development. MRI equipment produces clear images of the brain that provide conclusive scientific evidence that the wiring in the cerebral cortex is more developed in a well-attached, nurtured and stimulated infant. While the technology is new, these conclusions are not, they merely confirm what parents and psychologists have known for generations.

Investments in prenatal care and getting babies off to a good start during the first years of life are critically important. I fear, however, that in the absence of any strong structural analysis of the uneven distribution of opportunity and life chances, that the public investment pendulum has swung too far in one direction. More and more public and private donors are directing resources to younger children at the expense of other ages, particularly youth. Current reductions in the public provision of goods and services further limit options for truly disadvantaged young people. I fear that we are in the midst of redefining “deservedness”. In a calculated gamble, we are abandoning second-chance education—the flexible programs which permit “late bloomers” to blossom—and, as a result, most of our social and financial capital is now directed to the very young, thus reducing our commitments to youth.

To maximize the development of human potential, young people need access to opportunity through education and the development of their innate talents. They need to feel positive about themselves, have the capacity to develop trusting relationships, and connect with at least one caring significant adult. Too few young people experience success in either of the two public systems that touch the lives of all young people. The two systems have a common social mission: the development of a social citizenry, i.e., citizens with the capacity to assess and act responsibly in the civic as well as the private domain. Both systems’ lack of success may have much to do with their isolation and disconnection from other societal mainstays such as families, associations (faith communities, service clubs, unions), professional and voluntary social supports in the community, business (including local business stakeholders and workplaces) and a declining public tax base.

From this assessment, we are currently exploring initiatives in the following areas:

Access to Post-Secondary Education

The focus is on students in Toronto high schools who are unlikely to attend university or college. The selected students have some, or all, of the following characteristics: they are from poor households, (often single parent); they have parents who have no post-secondary school experience and may not have completed high school; they work more than 15 hours a week and may contribute to household income or live independently. Through collaboration with Toronto District school officials, principals, university officials, teachers and graduates of the program, students can earn up to two university credits in high school, may select a co-op placement at university, and receive the benefits of enrichment through a teacher training program.

Using the Millennium Fund to Create Registered Education Savings Plans for Poor Families with Children

Current welfare policies require poor families to deplete assets rather than accumulate them for designated deferred social purposes. The tax system on the other hand is a powerful instrument that encourages and enables middle- and upper-income earners to accumulate assets through deferred savings plans, e.g., Registered Retirement Savings Plans (RRSP), Registered Home Ownership Savings Plans (RHOSP) and Registered Education Savings Plans (RESP). It might be possible for the federal government's proposed Millennium Fund to permit some experimentation that would provide children from poor families with educational benefits through similar development accounts.

Peer Mentoring at Secondary School

In preparation for secondary school reform, this initiative is investigating ways of introducing successful peer-mentoring strategies. A collaboration of Ministry of Education officials, principals, peer education organizations and Laidlaw and another foundation is being considered.

Apprenticeship Programs

To explore opportunities to strengthen co-op and apprenticeship opportunities for students at the secondary school level. This initiative will examine new community-based approaches to engaging the broader participation of stakeholders.

Recreation

Recreation programs can help children and youth grow and develop into thoughtful, caring, contributing adults. While engaging in play, they develop

physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively. The skills acquired through recreation can provide a strong foundation for a successful future life. Recreation and sports programs teach young people co-operation, consideration, concern, respect for others, leadership, self-direction, and a healthy view of competition. Recreation also provides opportunities for self-expression and creativity, experimentation and exploration. Opportunities for the development of both peer and non-parent adult relationships in a safe environment are possible. Self-esteem and confidence-building are developed through challenging opportunities, achievement of competence, and growth through success.¹

If this is so, why do recreation programs fail to reach the majority of young adolescents, particularly girls, children with disabilities, and youth at risk? What are the barriers to participation? Do registration and equipment costs and transportation problems limit accessibility? Is organized recreation intended primarily for middle-class children with an ability to pay or who have supporting parents who can encourage their children to be active? Are the programs too structured? All of these, and similar questions, need to be explored.

According to a recent survey prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Culture & Recreation the greatest gap in service appears to be programs for young adolescents ages 13–15 years as well as 16–17-year-olds. There are limited places for these age groups to congregate other than the street or in malls. The aspirations of younger children are often shaped by the opportunities available to, and participated in by, older siblings.

A new leadership with a comprehensive vision of the role recreation can play in enhancing the wellbeing of children and youth is emerging at the public policy level, within some professional associations, and in a few communities, but an opportunity exists for expanded public interest work in this field.

Youth In or From Care

There are approximately 40,000 children and youth in the care of our child welfare system. They are in foster care, group homes, mental health treatment facilities, and correctional institutions (16,500 in Ontario). For many, the state has intervened and assumed a trust, *in loco parentis*. The transition from care to independent living, often by the age of 18, is poorly managed. Few life plans are constructed for many of the youth in care and few have supports to fall back on. The Foundation has established a monitoring panel to follow up a report by Ontario Child Advocate entitled *Voices from Within*. The panel will determine whether the children's voices are being heard and important changes being pursued with respect to a reduction in the use of intrusive measures and verbal, racial and physical abuse, better tracking and better assurance of a continuity of care rather than multiple placements.

In association with Ken Dryden, the Foundation provides support to national scholarship programs for youth coming out of care who want to pursue education at the post-secondary level. Twenty-four scholarships are being funded through a corporate, foundation and individual-donor appeal, speaker's fees and auctions. Several universities have agreed to establish permanent scholarships from matching endowment funds for youth from care.

The Foundation maintains a close working relationship with the National Youth in Care Network (Ottawa) and the Pape Adolescent Resource Centre. An advisory group of young people in or from care will be working with the Foundation to develop this program further.

Youth, Media and Politics

Often young people are not given an opportunity to have their concerns heard at decision-making levels. Consistent with its commitment to democratic pluralism, the Foundation is seeking opportunities to encourage, heed, and support the expression of opinions by young people. Since 1996 the Foundation has provided funding support to Regent Park Focus for its Media Arts Programme. Youth, with training, support and equipment from a professional video artists' centre have produced five high-quality videos that have been shown in schools and community centres and broadcast on a community cable station. A documentary, *Kickin' It: Teen Dating & Abuse*, prepared by Woodlawn Communications, has been broadcast and recently won an award at the Yorkton Film & Video Festival. In April 1998, several young people, clients from the Families in Transition Programme of the Family Services Association of Toronto, gave very powerful testimony in a video to the Special House-Senate Committee reviewing custody and access issues. (This Special Committee will be proposing changes to the *Divorce Act*.)

A fund was established in May 1998 with Trinity Square Video, an artist-run centre supporting organizations working with young people by providing equipment, training, production and post-production facilities to enable them to produce broadcast-quality projects.

The Environment²

Effective stewardship of the Earth for the benefit of the current and future generations requires changes in behaviour and new ways of thinking. Environmental considerations must be factored into personal and institutional decision making, and people with diverse interests must try to understand one another and seek common ground. (Joyce Foundation *1996 Annual Report*.)

Intergenerational responsibility is a central tenet of good environmental stewardship. The Foundation's new Environment Programme intends to use

emerging scientific research that indicates potentially significant health risks to the unborn, infants and child development from environmental “hazards”. There are many environmental contaminants in wide use (and new ones being introduced), that are highly toxic. As a society we have not yet determined how we might avoid their use and rely on nontoxic alternatives. Children are most at risk from environmental contaminants yet are not considered in the setting of environmental health standards. The program will undertake activities to create multi-sectoral collaborative relationships among corporations, health organizations, community groups and environmental organizations. The May 1998 seminar and study of the Clean Air Strategy Group of the Ontario Medical Association was one such collaboration. The OMA attracted wide attention for reporting that air pollution has become so high in Southern Ontario that on many days it may not be safe for children to play vigorously outdoors. The OMA therefore proposed several strategies to reduce smog.

The program premise is that broader cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary partnerships need to be formed to interject an ecological perspective in decision-making. Two sets of principles will guide and inform the program. The *precautionary principle, weights or evidence and burden of proof* form the first set. Following these principles we ought to act with caution when handling known carcinogenic or other poisonous materials. We would continue to make rational decisions on known information even if we do not have conclusive evidence. The burden of proof should not be on the citizen to determine whether a substance is harmful but should lie with the manufacturer to prove that it is not.

The second set of principles underlying the program is the Natural Step environmental framework. Natural Step not only defines a sustainable ecosystem but also sets out the necessary conditions for the survival of nature and humanity. The four system conditions hold that:

- Nature cannot withstand a systematic buildup of dispersed matter mined from the Earth’s crust;
- Nature cannot withstand a systematic buildup of persistent compounds made by humans;
- Nature cannot take a systematic deterioration of its capacity for renewal; and
- In order to meet human needs we must make efficient and just use of resources.

Program Goals

- To identify and foster community networks and organizations which will set priorities and strategies for healthy sustainable communities. These networks will be cross-sectoral and based on co-operative arrangements among nontraditional allies. The ultimate goal will be to establish a national vision for sustainable communities.
- To develop a co-ordinated strategy for engaging communities and linking community action to national and international government and corporate policy initiatives for the reduction of environmental contaminants in communities.
- To imbed the ecological perspective in everyday understanding of social and economic systems and broadly to influence policy and behaviour in the social, economic, and cultural domains.
- To achieve a better understanding of the relationship between environmental contaminants and children's health and to translate and disseminate this information to health professionals, policymakers and the public. The ultimate goal is the virtual elimination of key environmental contaminants.

In the latter part of 1997, Ontario environmental leaders were surveyed to determine management-assistance priorities. This information guided the development of The Sustainability Network which focuses on training and management assistance as a way of developing effective leaders and organizations. The goal of the project is to build capacity and help create a more sustained and focused environmental movement.

The Arts³

The Laidlaw Foundation is committed to the development of human potential and creativity and the maintenance of healthy constructive communities where children and their families can flourish. To this end, the Laidlaw Foundation believes that the arts play a vital role in the spiritual health of our communities. Our artists offer reflections of who we are and what we value as a society, often forcing us to challenge our assumptions and traditional ways of doing things.

For almost half a century, the Laidlaw Foundation has demonstrated its commitment to the Ontario arts community. The past two decades, this interest has been focused on the creation of new works in the performing arts.

The past two years have seen tremendous changes for the arts in Ontario, both politically and socially. We have seen the amalgamation of various municipalities and the resulting uncertainty about the future of the municipal cultural

funding bodies; the appointment of a new Chair to the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) with a pause in its evisceration; and the announcement of \$25 million in new money available through the Canada Council. In 1998 the Foundation's Arts Programme budget was increased to \$1,000,000.

During the past two years the Foundation has expanded its traditional arts funding practices to lend its support to a variety of initiatives. Using the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner) and emerging evidence demonstrating the benefit of arts education in children's cognitive development, the Foundation has supported teacher training through integrated arts in the Ontario Arts Education Institute. In conjunction with the OAC, the Foundation is funding a project to identify best practices in integrated arts education. A publication in multiple formats will be issued in the future. In partnership with the Canada Council, OAC and the Toronto Arts Council, the Foundation is exploring *the arts as animator*, as part of a national pilot project, Artists in Community. The Foundation is contributing to the program evaluation. Finally, through the AGO/OCASI project, the Foundation is addressing issues of access to art and community programming, by assisting a mainstream institution to diversify its programs and broaden its target audiences to better reflect current requirements.

The Foundation is witnessing new trends or shifts in the needs of artists. Artists are becoming more engaged in activities beyond the creation of their own work, or the reinterpretation of existing work for contemporary audiences. More and more, professional artists are working in community settings, teaching their art, or using their art to foster civic engagement and contribute to community life. Artists are increasingly participating in, or leading, community activities through recreational programming or in school residences or extra-curricular programs. The Internet and other new technologies with which artists are experimenting are changing the way artists work.

While the arts community continues to argue its economic value in job creation, local economic development, and tourism terms, the Foundation sees the arts as a tool for communication within a broader social and community development strategy. The arts provide people with the critical tools of reflection and debate. They enable us to recreate ourselves according to higher values and aspirations.

Imagining a New City

As the Foundation explored linkages across its program domains it began to imagine a new City of Toronto with an expanded social development mandate. Devolution to the municipality and amalgamation of departments into one local government structure would enable local government to develop its own

human and social development strategy. Parks and recreation, public health, social services, child care, arts, culture and heritage, libraries and social housing could be linked within one department responsible for the development of mission, social development goals and a capacity to engage in social reporting, i.e., the development of measurements of progress. Units of measurement could now be applied within common boundaries. The stock of facilities and an inventory of assets could now be liberated from bureaucratic silos and linked through a coherent social development plan.

It became possible to imagine that, under the leadership of the Mayor, a City Councillor would be designated with the full support of City Council as a Children's Advocate and that a Cabinet for Children could be established. Associate leadership would have to come from the current two, rather than the former eight school board chairs. Eventually it might even be possible to contemplate a Commission or Council for Children and Youth, reporting to City Council through an Executive Commissioner for Social Development. A proposal of this nature evolved from the Toronto Best Practices Working Group and was outlined in a submission to the Transition [to Megacity] Committee in August 1997. In addition, a conference on models for local government arts funding sponsored by the Toronto Arts Council and Metro Cultural Affairs received early encouragement and financial support from the Foundation.

In 1998 Laidlaw Foundation spearheaded an ad hoc coalition of public interest foundations (Maytree, Gordon and Trillium and, more recently, two public service organizations, The United Way of Greater Toronto and the Toronto Board of Trade), to develop a Toronto Stakeholders Project under the aegis of the Toronto Community Foundation. This project will identify a number of core indicators that will measure the civic vitality, social cohesion, economic prosperity, cultural development and environmental sustainability of Toronto. The Toronto Community Foundation will prepare an annual report.

The Importance of Public Reporting

The process of change is both known and mysterious. It can happen overnight, as in the case of a flood or ice storm, or it can take years. Rarely does a solitary factor or person produce change. Rather it almost always takes the efforts of many people, working together, over time.⁴

One set of strategies for promoting change is to enable competent credible organizations, i.e., NGOs, to develop scorecards. A vast array of public information and statistical evidence already exists. Some of it is fragmentary and dispersed but much of it is readily available from public data sources.

The goal of public reporting is to make data available for democratic decision-making. Weighing the cost of doing something today to equalize opportunity as opposed to the cost of deferral or inaction requires accurate data. Public reporting may also include the latest information about successful strategies for social development or pollution prevention.

The public is generally consulted at the end of the process, after the decisions are made. Linking public reporting and public opinion surveys and enabling Canadians to better understand the tradeoffs embedded in policy options all contribute to “deliberative democracy”. To make good decisions, citizens need good information; they need to know what is at stake, what the alternatives are and how they can act wisely on behalf of future generations.

In keeping with its traditional role as “community catalyst”, the Foundation expects that its Youth Engagement Programme will stimulate national discussion and encourage NGOs across the country to apply its experience and insights in their own communities.

FOOTNOTES

1. “Quality Assurance in Children’s Recreation & Sport”, Parks & Recreation Ontario, July 1996.
2. This section is based on material prepared by Bruce Lourie, Environment Programme Co-Ordinator.
3. This section is drawn from material prepared by Andrea Vagianos, Arts Programme Co-ordinator.
4. Joyce Foundation, *1997 Annual Report*, Chicago.