



New research offers clue on how to improve education outcomes for Canadian kids: Two parents

By Andrea Mrozek

A recent newspaper column highlights the contributions of Premier Dalton McGuinty to education in Ontario. Only slightly biased, the author, Charles Pascal, was hired by Premier McGuinty to assess early learning back in 2007. So it's no big surprise that Pascal thinks the premier will be remembered for his many contributions to education, including "over 125,000 more elementary students reading and writing at a higher level of proficiency."¹

If this is the case, will Premier McGuinty applaud a report released yesterday? The World Family Map Project reaches a striking conclusion for Canadian kids: Whether your child lives with one parent or two affects literacy scores, regardless of wealth and parental education.²

"Children living with two parents had higher reading literacy scores and were less likely to repeat a grade compared to those living with either one parent or neither parent in all three North American countries included in the report: Canada, Mexico and the United States," write the researchers. They go on: "This pattern is found even after accounting for the higher levels of poverty and lower levels of parental education among single-parent families."³

This is in keeping with other research conclusions in the social sciences showing a host of benefits for children raised by two married parents.

Unfortunately, Canadians in general and politicians in particular, don't typically grab hold of this research. This is to our kids' detriment.

Instead, there are two likely responses to these findings.

One category is a lack of surprise. Isn't this something that our grandparents knew without any research at all? Obviously where there are two parents in the home there will be better academic outcomes.

This set would agree with the report where the authors write that differences would have been even greater had the dataset been able to distinguish between two biological parents and families that include a stepparent. According to the authors, "[g]rouping these families into one category, as was done in the PISA 2009 dataset, may provide weaker results than when other family types are compared to families with two biological parents."⁴

The second response is more commonplace. It's also more harmful because it chooses to obscure these results, such that few Canadians are even aware.

This response is a refusal to acknowledge the result by simultaneously getting offended.

No one knows better than single parents that raising children on their own is more difficult—but still, many fear alienating those families and as a result, they speak of this research rarely, if at all.

Research is just research: It can show a trend line or highlight inconsistencies, or, the favourite of many an academic and think tank, result in the need for further research.

Yet it is our practical response that matters most.

For one, if we acknowledge that family breakdown has negative effects on children, our lackadaisical attitude toward marital dissolution is not a particularly loving one.

We all know families in the difficult throes of divorce, for example. A compassionate response in the cases that are low-conflict might involve encouragement to stay together, instead of a “live and let live” approach. (Families are not the place to be laissez-faire, as economist Jennifer Roback-Morse documented in her 2001 book *Love and Economics: Why the Laissez-Faire Family Doesn't Work*.)

There are indeed some *small* things government can do to limit family breakdown. This includes eliminating the marriage penalty in the tax code, which Canada finally did in 2007. It might include offering tax benefits to married parents—still the most stable family form.

Primarily, however, acknowledging this research requires a change in Canadian hearts on how we view family breakdown.

Politicians all claim to want to improve the education system for kids. Yet they ignore the elephant in the room as they apply band aid solutions. This new research directly pertains to improvements in literacy; improvements that come at no charge to the public purse.

The new World Family Map Project, an annual international research piece, has much more to say than this about family life across the globe. In this instance, however, it offers all Canadians yet another chance to grab hold of good research and apply it in their own lives, regardless of whether politicians are paying attention.

The Institute of Marriage and Family Canada is proud to be a co-sponsor on the World Family Map Project, published by the Washington D.C.-based Child Trends. For more information about The World Family Map project, please click [here](#).

Endnotes

¹ Pascal, C. (2013, January 14). Dalton McGuinty’s education legacy will outlive Bill 115 travails. *The Toronto Star*. Retrieved from <http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/article/1314985--dalton-mcguinty-s-education-legacy-will-endure-bill-115-travails>

² Lippman, L.H., Wilcox, B.W., Ryberg, R. (2013, January 15). World family map 2013: Mapping family change and child well-being outcomes. Essay: Two, one or no parents? Children’s living arrangements and educational outcomes around the world. Child Trends. Co-sponsors include the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Retrieved from <http://worldfamilymap.org/2013/>

³ *Ibid*, p. 69.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 59.