

THE HAMILTONIAN

www.thehamiltonian.net

Teresa DiFalco, Publisher

Virtual Panel Perspectives Report



On Hamilton's
"The Best Place To Raise A Child"
May 2012

In this edition of the Perspectives Virtual Panel, we asked our panel members for their views on " The Best Place to Raise a Child". Our question invited ideas on how we can best accelerate our progress toward this goal. We are hoping that our city council will take in these suggestions and observations. We have also invited each councillor and the Mayor to add their comments. If we receive any, we will post them verbatim. We also invite our readership to add their comments as well.

Additionally, if you would like a version of these submissions that you can easily print from a computer, please [click here](#) for a PDF version.

Q. The Best Place to Raise a Child in Canada, is the City of Hamilton's motto/vision. We welcome constructive criticism but also encourage you to provide ideas on how we might make additional progress in meeting this goal. Please structure your answer as follows:

To meet the goal of being recognized as The Best Place to Raise a Child in Canada, what do we need to:

- Continue doing
- Start doing
- Stop doing

Continue doing

We need to continue doing great infrastructure projects throughout the City. Infrastructure means continue to work on Light Rail; continue to work on expansion of GO service; continue working on downtown employment attractions like a medical school, Mohawk College, McMaster; continue working on bike lanes and traffic calming; and more convention space. Infrastructure also means carefully planning infrastructure to service the wider community from the McMaster Innovation Park to the Airport, to being efficient with Ancaster/403 area and mountain LRT lines.

Stop Doing

Stop the experiment with garbage collection. Every other jurisdiction I've seen has moved away from three bags to one bag and even in some jurisdictions every other week is garbage collection. It is a step backward in recycling and being more efficient with our landfill space and costs ratepayers more.

Start doing

Start investing in more services for children and young families. Services to investi-

gate would include more afterschool programs in elementary schools; making it more attractive to convert closed elementary schools into afterschool and daycare centres; more daycare centre spaces in existing locations; more school holiday and statutory programming for children.

Conclusion:

Hamilton has a lot going for it. It is surprisingly affordable place to buy compared to Burlington, Oakville, Toronto. If Hamilton wants to attract residents with the lure of raising a child, affordability, amenities and employment are the top priorities. As a municipal government, there is some periphery influence the City can exert on affordability and employment but the major influence is amenities. Make Hamilton attractive for families by offering services dual income families need.

Herb Shields

I know that mottos are sometimes adopted as unreachable goals to strive for. But this one doesn't impress me because it sounds too blustery. Hamilton should be a 'good' place to raise a child. Or at the very most "One of Canada's best places to raise children" But the moment we say "The best" we already set ourselves up for failure" Council should change this motto, a left-over from last term's un-productive 4 years in government.

Having said that, here is what I would suggest to make us a good place to raise children:

Continue doing:

Investing in education, especially in the formative early years. I believe the province is on the right track with this initiative and the number of 'best start' programs are testament to the good work being done in the city at this level. Hamilton was selected as a pilot for these programs and we have grown them nicely.

Stop Doing:

I am not aware of any anti-youth policies we need to stop, other than the controversial bylaw around group homes for young people that needs to be reviewed. I believe in radial separation for many things but in this case an exception could have been made.

Start doing

Substance abuse (alcohol and drugs) is a huge issue with children and adults. We saw a tragic case of a youngster dying of alcohol poisoning because of binge drinking in Waterdown. The parents who let that tragedy occur under their supervision should be

held accountable. Resources (counselling) should be made available in schools to reach these attitudes. The province must take the lead, but the city can assist too.

Larry DiIanni

Continue doing

First off, I have to disagree with the premise. The Best Place in Canada to Raise a Child is not the City of Hamilton's vision, although there seems to be a campaign by Councillors for it to be thought of as such. The City's Vision is: To be the best place in Canada to raise a child, promote innovation, engage citizens, and to provide diverse economic opportunities.

We have a four-part vision. We only ever seem to mention the first part. It has been truncated and turned into a slogan. Slogans are great for advertising, but poor as visions. I suggest we CONTINUE with the vision we have and that it be integrated into the City's Strategic Plan, which it is not currently. That's because the City Manager and most of the Senior Management Team don't know how to do that. They have no experience with operationalizing a vision. They are project managers, not strategic leaders, perhaps with a single exception.

Stop Doing

I recommend we STOP abusing and avoiding the stated vision. That we stop turning it into a Hallmark greeting card that provides little or no direction to Council, staff, or citizens. I recommend that we stop kidding ourselves that we are vision-focused and vision-driven as a city. We are not. Not even nearly. Our vision is being treated as if it were a coffee-cup label instead of a strategic vision that drives our planning, budgeting, actions, progress reviews, and achievements.

Start doing

I recommend we START by defining what we mean when we say: To be the best place in Canada to raise a child, promote innovation, engage citizens, and to provide diverse economic opportunities. Each word. Each strategic element. What's Best? #1? Top 10? By population? Etc. I recommend we put measurements/metrics against each of the strategic elements so that we will know not only what we are shooting for, but also how to assess our progress toward each element, and know when we've achieved our goals. These measurements are macro at the SMT level, and micro and personal at the front line level. This translation of macro to personal is essential if there is to be a clear line of sight between what I do as a front line worker or supervisor, and what the entire organization is chasing. We need to build measurable goals and related plans so that we are in a position to allocate appropriate resources.

I recommend that these elements be the driving force of every single Department, Division, and Team work plan. And that these elements form the primary strategic basis of the City's performance planning, review, and evaluation system. This is not the case at the moment. Add the fact we still have only about 50% of employees at the City of Hamilton who even have a completed performance evaluation and you can see we are woefully negligent in our efforts to be a vision-driven organization. Add the fact that 40% of our managers qualify for retirement within the next 5 years and we have a disaster in the waiting, one that will impact the future success of this city for another generation. How can we be sure we promote the best people into new positions of greater authority and responsibility when we don't even measure, provide feedback, or reward them based on the contribution their performance makes to the successful achievement of our stated vision. No wonder we're slow to change. We need to start acting like professionals and not like short sighted, ass-covering, job-protecting clerks. I for one am tired of the sloppy, naive, and incompetent approach we take to strategic planning and to integrating that strategic plan into personal work plans. Our Human Resources practices are so far behind the times it makes me wonder how we don't have even higher absenteeism rates than we have now, which are shockingly high. I'm a big believer in the power of vision. Having said that, for a vision to be powerful, it has to be defined, known, understood, believed, and acted upon. We have a long way to go.

Graham Crawford

This mission statement is a transparent fraud. It is embarrassing because it is so untrue. Run through the minutes of the last 10 years of city council and see if you can find anything that was decided because it was good for children. Zip. Da nada. Volunteers in the North End neighbourhood had to appeal the City's planning process to the OMB because children were not once considered in the planning process. 1300 children under 15 years of age live in the North End between Wellington, the CNR, and the Bay's water edge. At the 16 day hearing of that appeal held last year, local North End residents had to fight tooth and nail against the City as part of their campaign to slow traffic on streets with children.

Long before Toronto's Medical Officer of Health recommended it, long before New York adopted it in 2011, long before towns in Europe, the UK, Alberta, even the USA, the concept of 30K for children was proven by parents and experts in the North End but rejected by the City. What was profoundly even more disappointing is that the City went to the OMB and objected to the North End being characterized as a Child and Family Friendly Neighbourhood. They expressed a fear that if that label was given to the North End, other neighbourhoods would want the same thing. Duh?

Our Mayor gave support to the concept in the early meetings, even to the extent of signing a pledge with all the members of the Community Study Group that there was a moral imperative to changing the traffic patterns to protect children. Then did nothing to fight for it after that. I thought of all this as I watched the ambulance last December take the 8 year old child who was hospitalized by a speeding driver on Burlington Street at John. And again as I watched parents at a neighbourhood meeting this week tell their councillor Jason Farr that it is not safe for their children to cross Burlington Street. North End Neighbours prepared for the City staff and Council a video documentary on the hazards of living on Burlington Street, and the need to take cut-through traffic out of the neighbourhood.

For years after that video was prepared and right up to the present time, the traffic controls at Burlington and Wellington Street encourage drivers to cut through the residential streets rather than to take Wellington Street. It would take less than \$500 to change the timing of the lights to fix the problem. The evidence was that 1200 cars a day exceeded 63kph on Burlington Street during the time that children go to and come home from school. (Check Youtube: 30K All the Way Hamilton). Instead, Hamilton city council sent its lawyers to the OMB to fight the idea that the residential part of Burlington street should be calmed.

Council will make Hamilton The Best Place to raise a child? That's a lie. Its more than a lie. Its a dreadful coverup for the most cynical disregard of the welfare of children. And the core reason behind the reason our Council lies about its mission statement is that looking after children is a neighbourhood issue, and to do the job right, Council would have to agree that neighbourhoods should have some ability to make decisions. That will not happen in Hamilton unless there is a huge change of heart at the core of the City Hall environment.

In the final analysis, when protecting and caring for children (other than your own) runs into City Hall dreams, the kids loose, from Chad Collins dreams of a glorious harbourfront at the foot of James, Lloyd Ferguson's dream that his constituents can drive to the harbour for a sun tan, without getting a ticket, to Terry Whitehead's dream of perpetually being able to drive a boat on a trailer behind a car without impediment, through the neighbourhood, all as reported in our friendly local daily paper, when protecting our children runs into a City Hall dream, put the kids under the bus.

Herman Turkstra

The best way to raise a child, is within a nuclear family. If Hamilton is the best place, or wants to be, why do our public schools have ever declining enrolment, or a booming Condo economy that considers children already grown up, or empty nesters looking to downsize? Focusing on children has diminishing returns, as there are less clients to serve, according to the statistical analysis going forward. Hamilton should be considered the best place to live, why narrow the mandate? Want to live out your retirement in a safe, crime free environment, move to Hamilton? Want your kids to play sports, Hamilton has hundreds of soccer fields from one end of town to the other? Like going to the theatre, no problem, on the mountain or downtown we got entertainment. Want to lay on the beach, get a sun tan? No problem, we have three or four good ones, even some that have free parking. Want to catch a flight to a sunny destination without driving all the way to Toronto, check out HI, they got tons of flights, using new, super quiet Aircraft? You like Waterfalls, we have the most of any city in the world? What's not to love about Hamilton, other than fancy, wordy statements as hollow as a dugout canoe? We need a motto that works. How about, " Hamilton, I got used to it." Have all different Hamiltonians say this, like a commercial. A welder, a mechanic, a lawyer and a hairdresser. Like that Ford commercial. Cover all the bases. We have to show what we've got, in a way that captures the imagination and delivers.

Mark-Alan Whittle

A vision statement is supposed to inspire thinking and programs while not necessarily being fully and sustainably achievable. Since this is the vision of "City," I should only address what the "City" can do.

Clearly education would play a large role in the development of children but this is not an area where the "City" has any control.

Continue

- green spaces and recreational facilities. For full development children need safe places to play. A variety of sports helps them fine tune motor skills while maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Stop

- urban sprawl. Large, sprawling, car-centric neighbourhoods are not healthy. They are not walkable. They do not encourage social interaction. They do encourage cooing (often inside the house and interacting with some computer or entertainment technology). They chew up green spaces and replace them with shopping malls and asphalt.

Start

- twinning and tripling recreation facilities. Ice surfaces are at a premium. To add them economically, twin or triple existing facilities. This can leverage staff and me-

chanical resources well. De-couple the accessibility issue from full cost-recovery of these operations. Only full-cost recovery will ensure these are sustainable recreation resources. Similarly, combining soccer fields or ball diamonds make them more economical to operate. Handle access for children from poorer families through separate accessibility funds.

Marvin Ryder

Continue doing

- We need to continue building awareness of the goal itself amongst Hamiltonians. The city has been without a clear vision statement for decades (since the Ambitious City) so if this vision is to replace that one, we need to keep the education and awareness going. There is progress being made - people may be cynical about the goal but at least they are aware of it. That is a critical first step. Once Hamiltonians start to relate to it, and take ownership of it, they will be able to achieve it locally and promote that new identity across Canada.

Stop Doing

- We need to stop paying lip service to the goal and making policy decisions that contravene the goal. Hamilton will not be known as the Best Place to Raise a Child in Canada just because we say it is. We must prove it is.

Start Doing

- We need to align policy decisions to the goal. Much as decisions are considered from a triple-bottom line perspective (social, economic, environmental) we need to start asking "is this decision going to get us closer to the goal of being the best place to raise a child?" From how we treat the children at Charlton House, to which schools we close, to how we help the poor (many of whom are children) we need to frame the decision-making based on this goal. Anything less not only keeps us from actualizing the goal, it will quickly build cynicism. We also need to build on the motherhood and apple pie messaging and start including facts about why we are the best place - that our decision-making is based on the goal, that our location, economy, assets, culture etc. are evidence of why families will want to raise their child in Hamilton. We need to build the case to parents.

Laura Babcock

What we need to do is:

Observe and obey the Supreme Law of Canada and treat children as our equals by allowing and even encouraging them to exercise their Constitutional Right to vote in

Elections, “regardless of age or disability”. This would constitute a great beginning towards their early realization that **NO-ONE IS ABOVE THE LAW!** (Parents should be able to vote on behalf of their children, for as long as they are responsible for them, and/or until such time as their children demonstrate a want to vote for themselves for whom they choose.) A positive “rite of passage” towards adulthood.

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1867 to 2012

PART I - CANADIAN CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS

Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law:

Democratic rights of citizens

3. Every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons or of a legislative assembly and to be qualified for membership therein.

Equality Rights

Equality before and under law and equal protection and benefit of law

15. (1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Continue doing:

We need to continue counseling, lunch and anti-bullying programs.

Stop Doing:

Stop promoting and glorifying alcohol, in the media, as if it were a “rite of passage” to adulthood.

Take notice potential parents: While attempting to conceive, please stop drinking alcohol during the process. According to Social Workers at Barton Street Jail, 90% of all young offenders in their custody, (yo-yo’s as they are so-called by staff), are fetal alcohol syndrome babies.

Start doing:

Start developing culture in children from day one by teaching them to respect and tolerate one another’s lawful beliefs and differences.

We must start enforcing the law as it will be enforced upon them when they become

adults. We must empower children and adults alike, to not be afraid of exposing bullies and by confirming in them that the “if you squeal you’re a rat scare tactics used by bullies” is not a justification for unwanted physical or mental attacks upon their young person any more than it would be for an assault against an adult. Bad behavior simply justifies correction, not rewards.

Rev. Brother Michael Baldasaro

To meet the goal of being recognized as The Best Place to Raise a Child in Canada, what do we need to:

Create a plan which is properly documented and clearly identifies quantifiable goals that would truly make Hamilton The Best Place to Raise a Child in Canada. Otherwise the motto/vision is only a collection of words without a hope of being achieved.

The documented plan must then be used to measure performance to the goal with report cards that include both a score and constructive feedback on the goal attainment. These report cards can then be used to make adjustments to any of the programs to ensure we are continually working to achieve the final goal.

Continue doing

I’m not convinced we are currently doing anything substantial, impactful, or effective to fulfill the motto/vision.

Stop Doing

We must stop closing neighbourhood schools. The closure, divestiture and often demolition of this public infrastructure, which are ultimately owned by the community, have a disastrous impact on neighbourhoods. It is leaving them less attractive to families and creating a large gap in our urban and social fabric.

Start doing

Make the The Best Place to Raise a Child in Canada, more than just lip-service.

Paul Tetley

Hamilton's goal to be the best place to raise a child is ambitious - very ambitious.

"Best" is not the same as "good", "safe", or even just "decent". It means we must create a city that is better for children than Vancouver, Montreal, and Paris, and a host of other livable, vibrant cities.

But setting ambitious goals isn't something The Ambitious City ought to be afraid of. Hamilton should continue to set its sights on this lofty goal because even a partial

success is something we can all be proud of.

What we must stop doing, however, is merely paying lip service to it. We must take decisive action to actually meet this challenge.

"To be the best place to raise a child" ought to be a prism through which all civic decisions are viewed and evaluated. For example, consider two long-standing issues in our community, namely two-way street conversion and bicycle paths.

Studies show that one-way streets are more dangerous for children than two-way streets. Children don't drive, so creating a safe and walkable urban environment directly benefits them. And bicycle paths provide additional, safe transportation options, especially for older kids.

Two-way conversion and the creation of a continuous, integrated bicycle path network are thus two achievable, relatively inexpensive goals that would help propel Hamilton towards its ultimate goal of being the "best place to raise a child". Let's get started!

Adrian Duyzer

Start doing

The City needs to start operationalizing its vision through the process of forming policy. It's not enough to issue a vision statement and then go back to business as usual. The vision has to permeate the decision making process. Instead, it stands apart as boilerplate, an empty catch-phrase. The fact that we've truncated the city's full vision statement down to its first component is itself a sign that it's not doing its job. The full statement is fourfold: "To be the best city in Canada to raise a child, promote innovation, engage citizens and provide diverse economic opportunities."

Let's try applying the vision. Since my interests mostly run to transportation, land use and planning, I'll focus my attention there.

Seven years ago, analysts Richard Gilbert and Catherine O'Brien wrote a policy report called "Child- and Youth-Friendly Land-Use and Transport Planning Guidelines" that listed 27 land use and transportation guidelines that support what children need to enjoy healthy, active growth and development. The list includes the following items:

- * Dedicate city staff to bringing children's perspective to transport and land-use planning issues.
- * Lower automobile speed limits in all urban areas to reduce the incidence and severity of collisions involving children.
- * Ensure that pedestrian routes to schools, parks and other public amenities used by

children or by parents with children in strollers are available, safe and continuous.

* Encourage cycling with continuous dedicated bike tracks, safe intersections and convenient bike parking.

Hamilton's commitment to these goals is halfhearted at best. When the North End Neighbourhood association tried to establish a 30 km/h speed limit, Council balked after an in camera meeting and the issue has since gone to the Ontario Municipal Board. We're waiting to hear what the OMB will decide.

When Council approved a city-wide bicycle network, they gave themselves a 40 year time-frame to build it - and Councillors granted themselves permission to issue a veto in their own wards. As a result, the bike lane network will remain discontinuous and fragmentary for a very long time. Just as a road isn't much use to drivers if it isn't connected to other roads, a bike lane isn't much use to cyclists if it isn't connected to other bike lanes.

The Longwood Road redevelopment was supposed to transform that arterial into a complete street with wide sidewalks, bike lanes, slow traffic and lots of opportunities for chance encounters and creative exchanges. It's right next to McMaster Innovation Park, and it's the walking route for scores of students on their way to Westdale Secondary School. Community engagement strongly supported taming the street, but once the traffic engineers got their hands on it, most of the walking and cycling improvements were sacrificed to optimize automobile traffic flow. The engineers even want to replace the corner of Aberdeen and Longwood with a roundabout, which will be great for fast traffic flow but terrible for pedestrians.

The transportation consultants the City retained to help plan the east-west LRT line recommended converting Main, King and Cannon to two-way traffic, as did the Metrolinx Benefits Case Analysis. However, the city rejected that advice because the goal of maintaining automobile traffic flow on those de facto highways trumped the goal of making those street safer and saner for residents and (potential) visitors.

These are just a few recent examples in the area of land use and transportation planning, where municipal governments have a lot of influence. In all these cases, a real organizational commitment to child-friendly policies would have produced much different results.

Continue doing

The City is taking some tentative steps toward child-friendly development. The Public Works department hosts an annual Transportation Summit in which we invite experts

from across North America to explain how and why to invest in complete streets and walkability. This seems to be having some effect: last year, Public Works and Public Health teamed up to begin developing a pedestrian master plan that should, in theory, help to shape street design in the future.

We need to continue and accelerate the process of incorporating complete streets into our planning objectives. Our traffic engineers need to learn that "traffic" doesn't just mean "people in cars" - it means "people on the move" whether on foot, on a bicycle, on transit or in a car.

Stop Doing

We need to stop using the goal of fast automobile traffic flow as an excuse to trump all other objectives and considerations. Sorry, but the convenience of a driver getting across the city two minutes faster is not worth the devastating harm that these policies have done to neighbourhoods and the people who live in them - especially children, who are the most vulnerable and have the least autonomy.

Ryan McGreal

"I'm compelled to take a contrarian stance; I don't believe that *any* community should claim to be 'The Best Place to Raise a Child in Canada'. It's presumptuous, unnecessarily jingoistic, and in Hamilton, given our particulars, woefully naïve. Moreover, why anyone would want to claim they are the 'best' at anything without having (even arguably) attained this state is beyond me. It's certainly something to aspire to, but is anyone backing this as a motto really aware of what is entailed in the claim being true, or what work has to be done in the city to get to the point where we have a right to claim this? Making the claim does an enormous disservice to the notion; 'A *Great* Place to Raise a Child' is something more fitting for Hamilton to shoot for, but even that needs work.

The City should continue to address its poverty predicament. (Framing these efforts as seeing poverty as an economic development issue, not a 'social services' one.) It should stop seeing the automobile as the de facto reference point for planning, and swallow its pride and correct past missteps. (I'm avoiding using the now-hackneyed phrase 'walkability', preferring to look at 'liveability'.)

And it should start generating authentic dialogue with its residents, specifically in those areas where raising a child is more of an economic challenge than it is in others, but perhaps even more importantly, in a general sense. That is, changing the the 'Best Place to Raise a Child' endeavour from a facile marketing strategy to displaying some humility and consulting the very people who are raising children, asking them

what *they* feel is required to be able to make the motto's declaration and not seem entirely foolish in having done so."

M Adrian Brassington

Can Hamilton be the best place to raise a child when more than 8,500 kids go hungry every month and require the help of a food bank? Can we build a healthy community when one quarter of our children are growing up in low income households?

The answers seem apparent and dire. In the absence of leadership from the Federal Government on social policy issues and with a recent provincial budget that seems to have abandoned Ontario's commitment to a poverty reduction strategy, Hamilton may be on its own to deal with these critical issues.

The challenges our city faces are indeed significant. Yet the resolve of so many in this community to make a difference is having a positive impact and will lead to real, significant improvements in the lives of children and their families in the months and years to come. There is tremendous work taking place across the community to build a healthier, more prosperous, inclusive community that values the contribution of all of our residents. Hamiltonians have built the foundation for long-lasting change; we must now intensify our efforts, invest wisely and most importantly, work together as never before.

The [Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction](#) was founded in 2005 to tackle the City's unacceptable levels of poverty. A collaboration of community partners, our members come from across Hamilton and include leaders from the business and non-profit sectors, from government, education and faith communities as well as individuals who experience daily poverty. Our goal is to reduce and eliminate poverty through the aspiration of making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child: a goal that was later adopted as part of the City of Hamilton's vision statement.

Eighteen months ago, we released a new Action Plan that focused attention on key priorities we believed could have a significant impact on reducing poverty in our community. Together with community partners, such as the Hamilton Best Start Network, the Public and Catholic school boards, McMaster University, numerous community organizations and with the support of the City of Hamilton, progress is being made.

Reducing low birth-weights in Hamilton's neighbourhoods

The issue

The Hamilton Spectator's groundbreaking investigative series, Code Red 'Born' revealed significant numbers of low weight births in some of Hamilton's lowest income neighbourhoods. Promoting maternal health is critical as low weight babies have significant health and learning disadvantages both in the short and longer term.

The local response

Through the advocacy of the City's Public Health Department, the community hopes to move forward with a [Nurse-Family Partnership](#) program that has already produced outstanding results. The partnership matches high-risk, low-income first-time mothers with a nurse who conducts intensive home visits prior to birth and up until the child reaches two years of age. The program shows positive results not only in reducing the rate of low weight births, but has been successful across North America in getting mothers prepared to enter or re-enter the workforce; most importantly it puts babies on the right path towards good health.

Investments in the early years

The issue

Too many kids in Hamilton are growing up in poverty, and waiting lists for subsidized child care spaces remain far too high. While the Ontario Government committed to reduce child poverty by 25% by 2013, recent decisions seem to indicate they will miss that goal by a long shot. Canada is one of the only countries in the industrialized world where child poverty outpaces adult poverty, a reality is born out here in Hamilton as well.

The local response

[Hamilton's Best Start Network](#) has been a provincial leader in ensuring that children get the best start in life when supported by parents. Best Start supports families by providing a wide-range of services for children and their parents including an affordable child care service that focuses on helping kids to speak, read and interact with friends. Despite, falling behind in delivering on the Ontario Child Benefit, the Province of Ontario is investing in early childhood development programs; the roll-out of full-day kindergarten is already having a positive impact in children's literacy levels and should lead to longer term reductions in poverty. Still, as former Roundtable chair Mark Chamberlain noted "*a child's brain development doesn't wait for funding*" - child poverty remains atrociously high. The federal government must come to the table and implement a national child care strategy.

School nutrition

The issue

Children are going to school hungry in Hamilton. 46% of all those using food banks are under the age of eighteen which has a profoundly negative impact on children's education levels and their health. Through Hamilton Partners in Nutrition, the Hamilton Wentworth Public School Board and the Hamilton Wentworth Catholic School

Board and other community partners, seventy-five student nutrition programs across the city served 2.2 million lunches and snacks to kids in 2009/2010. Sadly it wasn't enough. More than 90 schools in the city remain without a student nutrition program.

The local response

The Poverty Roundtable and [the Hamilton Community Foundation](#) through the Social Planning and Research Council have identified the [development of a universal school nutrition program](#) as an essential component to give all children across the city the opportunity to eat healthy, nutritious meals during the day. Recently, Hamilton City Councillors adopted as part of their strategic plan the Roundtable's recommendation that our community should move forward with a universal school nutrition program. A recent report on student nutrition out of Toronto has confirmed that enabling kids to have healthy food during the school day "improves student behavior, reduces tardiness and disciplinary problems and improves focus and students ability to stay on task".

Supporting mixed income schools and neighbourhoods

The issue

The concentration of poverty in some inner city neighbourhoods and schools is cause of enormous concern. Despite great teachers and new facilities, and tremendous programs in place by both the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board and the Hamilton Wentworth District Catholic School Board, the educational outcomes in many central-north-east end Hamilton schools are still below provincial averages. Outcomes seem linked to family poverty levels in those areas. High school graduation rates in particular neighbourhoods are very alarming. There's a 30% drop out rate in Hamilton's lowest income neighbourhood and a less than 1% dropout rate in the most affluent neighbourhood. Students who do not graduate have lost earning potential of \$700,000 over the course of their working lives.

The local response

80 local school districts in the US have now made the commitment to ensure all their public schools integrate kids from across the socio-economic spectrum. While local test results, drop-out rates and graduation levels are showing improvement, Hamilton Community Foundation CEO, Terry Cooke, a champion of mixed income schools has noted "Overwhelming evidence proves that mixed income schools tend to perform well and schools that segregate poverty mostly fail". With the current accommodation review underway in the Public Board, Hamilton is presented with a unique opportunity to change the dynamic, promote innovative responses such as placing magnet academic programs in inner-city neighbourhoods to help students succeed.

Living Wage

The issue

Many parents with low wage jobs in Hamilton end up facing impossible choices: Buy their children clothing or heat the house; feed their families, or pay the rent. Child poverty in Hamilton is very much a low wage story: nearly 8,000 families with kids in Hamilton live in poverty despite having one or both parents working. This impacts family health, education levels and our community's future prosperity.

The local response

In December, 2011 the Poverty Roundtable, Social Planning Council and community partners launched '[Living Wage Hamilton](#)' and with the assistance of economist Hugh Mackenzie, calculated the city's living wage at \$14.95. It's the hourly wage needed for a family to afford basic everyday expenses, such as housing, food, clothing, utility bills, and childcare. A living wage is calculated based on what it costs to live in a specific community, so living wage rates change from community to community as living expenses change. The City of Hamilton, McMaster University and the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board have committed to move towards becoming living wage employers. Many private sector employers have done the same – understanding that living wages are good for employees and their families, good for their businesses' bottom line and good for the community.

Outstanding community efforts

There is so much more work taking place across the community. Innovative programs such as [An Instrument for Every Child](#), [Pathways to Education](#), and the Hamilton Spectator's [SpecKids](#) and many, many more largely volunteer-led initiatives aim to provide children in our City with opportunities, experience and hope. Dozens of other champions foster inclusion and build community. Even kids themselves, like Oliver and Piper Allen-Cillis through [Oliver's Garden Project](#) are part of the solution. So given the challenges outlined, can Hamilton be the Best Place to Raise a Child? You bet we can – we just need to believe we can make a difference.

Tom Cooper

To contact The Hamiltonian, please email us at admin@thehamiltonian.info. Now offering reasonable rate advertising opportunities.