



# Max Bell Foundation

## Strategic Review Report

Program Priorities 2023-2025

August 2023

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One of our aims at Max Bell Foundation is to focus on issues that matter most to Canada and to Canadians. What matters most, of course, is a matter of perspective. Narrowing the enormous number and diversity of public issues to an agenda of priorities is a challenging task for an organization that seeks to allocate its finite resources in ways that yield the most public benefit.

At Max Bell Foundation, we approach that task by tapping the expertise of individuals whose day-to-day work requires a focus on public issues. During 2022, we conducted interviews with 36 people employed in either professional public services across Canada or in civil society organizations. The interviews focussed on the question: what do you expect will be the priorities on your agenda in the foreseeable future?

We repeat this exercise every third year in an effort to ensure that our funding priorities remain broadly aligned with the priorities of Canadians, as expressed through their democratic institutions and civil society organizations.

The table below summarizes the results of our most recent program priority update. It shows that our updated priorities differ only slightly from those of the past three years. In the years ahead, we'll look to support efforts to shape public policy changes that will in turn improve these outcomes.

We are particularly interested in opportunities to support projects related to any of the priorities listed below that also aim to improve the well-being of Indigenous individuals and communities.

Following the table is a more detailed report on our findings.

Previous (2019-22)	Updated for 2023-25
<b>ENVIRONMENT</b>	
Assisting communities in adapting to the effects of climate change.	Communities in Canada are better adapted to the effects of climate change.
Assisting in the transition to a low carbon economy.	Canada has a low carbon economy.
Resolving conflicts between ecological integrity and growth and development of the economy.	Canada conserves its biodiversity while promoting economic growth and development.
<b>EDUCATION</b>	
Preparing learners for digital citizenship and an evolving knowledge economy.	Affordable high-quality early learning and child care is available to all Canadians.
Improving the mental and physical health and wellness of learners in K-12 schools.	The physical and mental health of learners is enhanced by their attendance at K-12 schools.

Ensuring school success among sub-populations where low levels of success persist.	Formal education settings in Canada enable success for all learners, especially those who face particular challenges or systemic barriers to success.
<b>HEALTH AND WELLNESS</b>	
Promoting good mental health among children and youth.	Supports and services leading to better mental health outcomes can be accessed by all Canadians, especially those who face particular challenges or systemic barriers.
Improving “value for money” in health care, especially as related to assessing and spreading innovations in health care delivery, and mobilizing knowledge.	Health care systems, including long-term care, provide all Canadians with timely access to high-quality, cost-effective care.
Encouraging wellness and reducing illness among Canadians whose health is at risk due to age-related factors and/or social determinants of health. Of particular interest are initiatives that focus on the most vulnerable populations.	Canadians who may be vulnerable because of the social determinants of health can access supports and services that lead to improved health and wellness.
<b>CIVIC ENGAGEMENT &amp; DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS</b>	
N/A	Canada’s democratic institutions are resilient and engage respectfully with civil society.
N/A	Canadians, especially those who face barriers to engagement, are enabled and prepared for respectful civic engagement.
N/A	The public information and media environments contribute to constructive civic engagement.

### Method

Every third year, Max Bell Foundation conducts an environment scanning exercise intended to identify and prioritize public issues. In the fall of 2022, Max Bell Foundation staff interviewed 36 individuals who are employed either in federal or provincial public services, or by Canadian registered charities. Individuals were chosen for their experience and leadership in the Foundation’s program areas (i.e., environment; education; health and wellness; and civic engagement and democratic institutions).

The interviews, conducted by telephone or videoconference, lasted approximately twenty minutes. Interviewees were asked the following questions:

1. What do you see as the 2 or 3 most important public policy issues in your field in the near term (i.e., 3 - 5 years)?
2. Is there anything else you think we should consider?

This research was not scientific. Our lists of interview subjects were developed primarily from contact lists on provincial and federal government websites. We contacted deputy ministers and directors of policy working in the ministries of health, the environment, education and those concerned with democracy and voting. We focused primarily on the Federal Government, and the governments of British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. We also contacted representatives from provincial and national professional organizations like teachers' federations and medical associations. To develop a list of civil society leaders, we contacted the charities and foundations with whom the Foundation has worked in the past, as well as prominent researchers. In total, we interviewed 20 public servants and 16 civil society leaders. The response rate to the request for a phone interview from both groups was approximately 25%.<sup>1</sup> The interviews are summarized below.

### General Trends

- In 2019, climate change was mentioned by almost all interviewees. In 2022, it was top of mind for respondents who work in the environment area, but almost unmentioned otherwise.
- Since 2013, public servants and civil society leaders have continued to focus on the increasing need for collaboration and de-siloing of government and service providers.
- In the past, respondents identified a growing understanding of the interconnectedness of public problems (e.g., social determinants of health; early childhood development; tensions between ecological integrity and economic growth). This trajectory continues, with many highlighting the need to identify integrated solutions.
- Both government and civil society leaders identified the gaps in education performance and health outcomes between Indigenous communities and the rest of Canada. Many saw these problems as intertwined, and suggested that health and education systems need immediate and robust interventions. At all levels, interventions need to include Indigenous perspectives.
- In health and wellness and education, equity was mentioned by almost all respondents.
- Both government and civil society leaders feel that the Canadian context is increasingly polarized. Policy issues that could have been considered non-partisan or cross-partisan in the past are now more likely to be understood as partisan.

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<sup>1</sup> In the past, the response rate was roughly 40%. For the first time, some respondents declined on behalf of entire ministries, not just themselves. Some decliners told us their ministry was undergoing too much upheaval to participate, while a higher rate simply did not respond at all.

### Lessons for Max Bell Foundation

In several instances, respondents offered advice for grantmaking foundations:

- Grantmakers like the Max Bell Foundation are seen to be free to take greater risks than other institutions in either the public or nonprofit sectors.
- Grantmakers are seen to be non-partisan, generally neutral, and well connected across the public, non-profit, and for-profit sectors.
- Both senior public servants and civil society leaders believe there is a critical role for the nonprofit sector to play in public policy development.
- Foundations have the flexibility to identify and respond to systemic problems with a longer-term perspective. Foundations are better positioned to do this than government or private business.
- Foundations and civil society have the ability to champion positive visions of the future, especially in regard to climate change.

### Policy Issues: Environment

- As in 2019, climate change adaptation and mitigation is the preeminent national issue, with implications for federal and provincial governments. Some of the issues raised include:
  - Extreme weather events that will strain existing infrastructure, ecosystems, and urban environments.
  - Electrification of industry, renewables, electric vehicles, green transportation, and other ways to transition to cleaner energy.
  - The carbon pricing debate is likely to continue, with concerns around its affordability in the context of inflation.
  - Freshwater resources are becoming more precarious.
  - Canada could take a leadership position globally relative to increased and sustainable food production with reliable data collection and measurement tools.
- As the climate changes, and as we enact policies to mitigate and adapt to climate, the Canadian economy will undergo a significant shift. The ideas of a closed economy, circular economy, green economy, or low carbon economy were common among respondents, often intersecting with affordability and finance.
- Economic reconciliation is gaining interest and attention.
- Environmental, social and governance (ESG) goals are becoming increasingly important to investment and the way business is done, with concerns around their accountability in meeting climate goals.
- The imperative for economic growth and prosperity in an open economy with a significant dependence on resource extraction continues to conflict with the imperative to protect and/or preserve ecological integrity. Canada needs to find integrated policy solutions to address this conflict.
- Maintaining biodiversity and nature conservation is still a major concern.

### Policy Issues: Health and Wellness

- The pandemic profoundly impacted the health and wellbeing of Canadians and the country's health care system.
- The sustainability and resilience of the health care system is a top concern, with health human resources shortages and increases in demand for services identified as alarming and pressing issues.
- As in 2019, long-term care, end-of-life care, and home care are increasingly important as Canada's population continues to age and put pressure on the health care system.
- Public servants and civil society leaders continue to identify the need to invest in prevention and wellness. Some of the areas particularly deserving of investment are:
  - A population-level approach to chronic diseases.
  - Mental health and substance use.
  - Social determinants of health<sup>2</sup> informing the design and delivery of both health promotion and health care, especially for Indigenous communities.
- Governments remain increasingly interested in creating better community integrated care that adapts to the social and health needs of individual communities.
- Digital health and virtual care continue to be an urgent topic given their wide use and access during and following the pandemic, which is expected to continue in the foreseeable future.
  - Gaps in access, equity, and affordability, and barriers to implementation persist.
  - Progress made during the pandemic presents an opportunity with regard to remote patient monitoring and an increased transparency and accountability as patients can access their own health record.
- Technological innovation is increasing treatment options, with a potential leading role for pharmacare in local production of vaccines and targeted and personalized medicine.
- Many public health officials are interested in the effects of climate change on health (e.g., transmission of infectious diseases between animals and humans; the mental health effects of extreme weather events).

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<sup>2</sup> The generally accepted key determinants are: Income and Social Status; Social Support Networks; Education and Literacy; Employment/Working Conditions; Social Environments; Physical Environments; Personal Health Practices and Coping Skills; Healthy Child Development; Biology and Genetic Endowment; Health Services; Gender; Culture. See [http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/determinants/#key\\_determinants](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/determinants/#key_determinants).

### Policy Issues: Education

- Many students experienced learning loss during the pandemic. It is likely that some sub-populations experienced more learning loss than others. Effective assessment will be important to understand the depth of loss, as well as to understand where it occurred.
- Equity is an increasingly important focus. In 2019, most of the equity concerns were focused on how prepared different populations of students were to learn when they crossed the threshold of a school. In 2022, decision makers are also concerned about broader conversations around equity and how they play out in classrooms for students and teachers.
- Since 2016, concern for the mental health of children and youth has been a recurrent topic. The pandemic only exacerbated issue for many students, and this continues to be top of mind.
- Reconciliation and the success of Indigenous students at all levels of education continues to be a topic of concern.
- Effective curricula are a recurrent issue and, in 2022, respondents were especially concerned about the curricula and institutions preparing learners to enter the labour market.
- Early learning is critical to childhood development. In 2019, some jurisdictions were taking steps to integrate early learning centres into existing public schools. In 2022, some ministries of education are taking responsibility for early learning and care, and the Canada wide Early Learning and Care agreement continues to preoccupy policymakers.

### Policy Issues: Democracy

- Trust in institutions is an important area of concern for many respondents.
- The rise in misinformation and polarization is also deeply concerning. With the rise of social media and algorithms that prioritize clicks and engagement over truth and impartiality, there is a concern about where Canadians are getting their information and the state of the public discourse.
  - Balancing free speech and justice, equity, diversity and inclusion can be a considerable challenge.
  - Some respondents examined this problem through the lens of social cohesion.
  - Technology can enable democracy, but right now social media and other technologies can undermine democracy and are developing more quickly than they can be regulated.
- Almost all agreed that there needs to be high quality outreach to citizens and voters, as well as opportunities for citizens and voters to speak to and participate in government.
- For some government departments, a *Nothing About Us, Without Us* lens, combined with a desire to lift all citizens out of poverty so that they can fully participate in society, is understood as shoring up the foundations of Canadian democracy.
- Electoral reform was mentioned as a potential solution to disaffection from some voters.