

B.C. Election 2017: Kids can't vote, but child care a critical election issue ^[1]

Author: Culbert, Lori

Source: The Province

Format: Article

Publication Date: 22 Apr 2017

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EXCERPTS

Although children can't vote, where they are cared for and how much it costs have emerged as key campaign issues leading up to the provincial election.

The various party platforms diverge widely on ideas to address what many see as a child-care crisis in B.C., specifically the long wait-lists for not nearly enough quality daycare spaces, and the sky-high cost if you are lucky enough to find one.

"I think this time people will have child care top of mind when they go into the voting booth," said Sharon Gregson, with the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C.

"The reality is that no matter what happens on May 9 (election day) ... there will still be a child-care crisis on May 10. But we do have some things we can do immediately to lessen the crisis."

That includes elements of a plan to introduce \$10-a-day child care in B.C., a concept her group has collected more than 15,000 signatures on a petition to support. Gregson argues affordable daycare is not just an issue that matters to parents of young children, but to employers and those wanting to grow the economy, including the Vancouver Board of Trade, which endorsed affordable child care in its election wishlist.

Indeed, a Mainstreet poll done for Postmedia in February found nearly half of the 2,352 respondents supported the idea of a government-subsidized \$10-per-day plan, with the most solid support in Metro Vancouver.

One of those supporters is Shelley Sheppard, whose 16-month-old son Mac died in January in an accident at an unlicensed Vancouver daycare. The heart-broken mother posted on Facebook an open letter to Premier Christy Clark earlier this month, begging her to fix a system that she describes as unsafe, inaccessible and unaffordable.

"I believe that my experience as Mac's mother and as a social worker provides me with enough validity to confidently say that the current child-care system in B.C. does not work for the majority of working families," wrote Sheppard, who works at an aboriginal child welfare agency.

"In fact, I would go so far as to say that the child-care system is failing and my son has paid the ultimate price."

The Liberals, running for a fifth consecutive term in office, have steadfastly maintained that a program loosely modelled after Quebec's \$10-per-day system would be too expensive to finance, with an estimated pricetag of \$1.5 billion a year.

The Quebec system has its naysayers and the Liberals echo some of those criticisms, including that the universal program unnecessarily subsidizes rich parents.

The Liberal platform instead vows to "cut through waitlists" by creating 5,000 new child-care spaces this year, and another 3,700 by 2020. This is in addition to 4,300 new spaces since 2015.

The party's election blueprint said it would work with the federal government to create more spaces, after Ottawa announced last month it would give the province \$90 million annually to help B.C. address its child-care crisis. Despite the new federal funding, the platform does not increase the Liberals' original goal of 13,000 new spaces by 2020, first announced in February's budget.

The NDP says child-care costs in B.C. have increased 37 per cent over the last decade, and plans to address that by introducing an affordable system: \$10 for a full day, \$7 for a half day, or free child care for families making less than \$40,000 annually. The plan would start by focusing on kids under the age of two, and would take 10 years to expand to include all pre-kindergarten kids.

The party has promised to partly fund the \$1.5-billion program by re-instating a tax the Liberals recently ended on top income-earners, and insists the program will pay for itself in just a few years.

“Quality, affordable child care will help parents get back to work,” says the NDP platform. “Recent economic studies couldn’t be more clear, concluding that affordable, accessible child care generates significant economic activity.”

The Green party says its daycare plan would provide up to 25 hours of free early childhood education each week to three- and four-year-old children. For families with children younger than three, the party’s plan calls for free daycare for kids of working parents or a \$500-per-month credit if a parent stays at home.

Those changes, to be phased in over four years, would cost about \$4.239 billion over those four years, the party said.

Advocates are demanding change, in part, because Vancouver’s child care rates are among the highest in the country. A toddler space, for example, has a median rate of \$1,325 a month — a price that climbed nearly 10 per cent in just two years. This consumes almost a third of the average woman’s salary, says the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

The Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C.’s \$10 plan is well costed-out and shows some of the investment will be returned to government through taxes paid by more mothers re-entering the work force, said Kevin Milligan, a University of B.C. economics professor with specializations in taxes and child care.

The Liberals’ concern about a universal program unnecessarily helping wealthy parents is a legitimate one, Milligan said, but it could be alleviated by adopting Quebec’s new system: the basic rate there is now \$7.75 a day for a family that makes less than \$50,000, but there is a sliding scale that increases rates to \$21.20 for families that earn more than \$160,000.

He does not believe the Liberal goal to create another 8,700 child-care spaces between now and 2020 will significantly reduce waitlists.

“My strong suspicion is that it is not going to be sufficient to meet the needs that are out there. I think there is room to invest more money there,” said Milligan, who is not affiliated with any political party.

There is criticism of the Quebec program, frequently around the quality of the care. Studies there have found the public child-care centres to be far superior to family-based and private daycares that receive government subsidies. There are waitlists of up to four years for the good public centres, as only about one third of Quebec kids in daycare have spots in these.

While poor quality in Quebec’s private daycares is an issue, the province’s successes include getting parents back to work, said economist Pierre Fortin, a Université du Québec à Montréal professor emeritus. “The labour force participation rate of mothers in Quebec is one of the highest world-wide.”

Advocates in B.C. examined the Quebec model, but created their own plan to address issues such as quality. The overall cost of the made-in-B.C. \$10-a-day proposal includes ensuring all caregivers have the proper training and that they are paid an average of \$25 an hour, says the coalition’s website.

The coalition insists the Liberals have not invested enough in children and underspent their child-care budget by \$100 million over the last four years. Gregson added the creation of 8,000 new spaces by 2020 won’t solve the crisis when 18,000 children are expected to be born in B.C. during those years.

In its February budget, the Liberals pledged \$20 million to help create the 5,000 spaces pegged for this year. The money will go to regions that are underserved or to address other needs, such as more spaces for infants, toddlers and aboriginal children.

“Government is working to ensure that parents have access to the supports and services they need to help them build a better future for their families,” Children’s Minister Stephanie Cadieux, who is running for re-election, told Postmedia last month.

According to the Mainstreet poll, more Liberal voters oppose the \$10 plan than support it. The opposite was true for NDP and Green voters, and among the all-important undecided vote.

In her emotional Facebook letter, baby Mac’s mother pleaded with the Liberals to consider major changes to the child-care system, so parents can find a safe place to leave their kids every morning.

“I strongly do not believe that merely creating some extra daycare spaces is the answer. The system needs to change,” Sheppard wrote to the premier. “Once you drop off your child and that daycare door closes, you have no idea what is happening to your child. This is a very real fear for most parents and a fateful reality for Mac.”

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