

Group lobbies for childcare plan ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Natalie Lucas knows what it's like to be a poor parent.

Lucas was a mother of four in the 1980s when her husband suffered an injury that kept him from working. That eventually prompted Lucas to become an early childhood educator, but she struggled to provide for her family while going to school.

"We definitely were under the poverty level," said Lucas. "There were times when my kids didn't get to eat. I was scrounging for coins in the furniture looking for enough money to get a thing of milk. I know there's a lot of people like that right now and probably even more."

Lucas doesn't want to see other parents suffer as she once did. She's part of the West Kootenay Boundary Branch of the Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia (ECEBC), which is calling on the province to adopt the \$10-A-Day Child Care Plan.

The plan, which was initially released in 2011, would provide childcare for infants through Grade 1 for just \$10 a day, or \$7 for half day, for families with a total income of more than \$40,000. Any families below that line get free care, and the province picks up the rest of the bill.

Full implementation of the plan is estimated to cost \$1.794 billion, according to a study commissioned by ECEBC. The same study points out, however, that the net revenue increase would be \$1.952 billion.

Lucas, who runs the Wee Ones child care centre in South Slocan as well as the Valhalla Children's Centre in Slocan, says it's a better alternative to the current provincial subsidy, which calculates assistance based on family income and pays a maximum \$750 per month for a single child.

"People think, 'Well we've got subsidies to support the low-income families and the single mothers.' But I find a lot of single mothers struggle to get through that [application] process, because it's hard."

Adoption of the \$10-A-Day Plan is part of the B.C. NDP's election platform. Nelson-Creston NDP MLA Michelle Mungall says the problem with the current subsidy is that it assumes anyone making more than \$40,000 can afford rising child-care costs.

"There's many people who make higher than what the subsidy allows for, and yet their child care is still just about close to the monthly cost of rent or housing," said Mungall.

"I've talked to a lot of parents who say, 'Wow, I could get a law degree for the amount I have to pay in child care the next four years.' The reality is the subsidy is just not keeping pace with what's affordable for families."

Recent stats show child care costs are on the rise throughout Canada.

A study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives released in December examined fees in 28 cities. Toronto's average fees were the most expensive nationwide (for example, infants under 18 months old cost parents \$1,649 a month, or \$82.45 per day if care is provided 20-of-30 days a month). Vancouver, meanwhile, also ranked high in fees in each of the three age categories.

Quebec cities benefited from the province capping fees, which was raised in January to \$7.55 per day.

Child care is a pricey option for parents in Nelson. Figures supplied by the ECEBC show the average cost of caring for children younger than 36 months is \$55.20 per day, while kids aged three-to-five years old cost \$47.67 per day.

There are currently 21 licensed child care providers in the Nelson area, according to the Ministry of Children and Family Development website.

The \$10-A-Day-Plan, which was authored by the ECEBC and the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C., is promoted as a made-in-B.C. solution in the midst of rising child care costs.

"These families are constantly drawing from the provincial and federal governments," said Lucas.

"With the plan, it's an investment. The families will be able to get off social assistance. They'll be able to start making their own living."

Lucas said finding qualified early childhood educators has also become a chore. ECEs can expect an annual salary of \$33,370, or an hourly range of \$11 to \$24, according to welcomebc.ca. The \$10-A-Day Plan would guarantee an average wage of \$25.

Valhalla is licensed for 16 kids, but Lucas said she can only accept eight because the centre has just one staff member.

"We're not valued as educators. We're looked at as babysitters," said Lucas. "So why would we pay a babysitter \$20 an hour? Now we have qualified educators unable to support their own families. They're leaving the profession.

"I know personally I've had ECEs work for me until tree planting season comes along. They work for me, then they quit, they get good wages, and then they hope to get a job as an ECE. It's insane.

"They don't want to do that, but they have to do that so they can support their families."

It would likely take a change in government to see the plan adopted provincially.

The B.C. Liberals included an extra \$20 million in last month's budget for an additional 5,000 child-care spaces.

That was followed last week by a \$90-million investment by the federal government in B.C. child care, as well as an affirmation by B.C. Finance Minister Mike de Jong that the party has no interest in the \$10-A-Day Plan.

Tanya Wall, the Liberals' candidate for the Nelson-Creston riding ahead of the May 9th provincial election, has personal experience with the child care system.

"When I became a single mom, child care was one of the biggest, frightening challenges in front of me. 'How am I going to afford my child care? How am I going to get to work so that I can put food on the table?'" said Wall, who added she was lucky to have family help.

Wall isn't sure \$10 a day is a realistic goal for child care, but she also doesn't dismiss the plan either.

She concedes the current subsidy is limited by using \$40,000 income as a line in the sand for applicants, and that there are parts of the \$10-A-Day Plan that the government should consider folding into their system.

"I think what we need to work on is more opportunity within that subsidy to say if you are going to school and you are working and you are raising a family, let's look at how we can help you," said Wall.

"Let's not base it all on what you make for a wage, because we don't know everyone's circumstance. ... I think we need to do a broader review of everybody's personal circumstances versus just labelling everybody with just one brush."

The idea of a national child care plan was first proposed by the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970. Since then three attempts to adopt federal plans have failed to pass, most recently the federal Liberal Party's Foundations Program in 2006.

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