

Comment: People needed to staff promised child care spaces ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The news is gratifying for those concerned about child care in B.C. NDP Leader John Horgan has pledged to create 22,000 new child-care spaces in three years and 66,000 new spaces in five years. Premier Christy Clark says her government will invest \$1 billion to create 60,000 new spaces in four years.

Let me be clear right up front — I love the idea of child care, especially affordable child care. It does not matter to me if you are Liberal, NDP, Green, federal, provincial or even if you're the Wild West Widget Party — child care matters and we need to invest in the well-being of our children.

Here is where I am worried that the train might go off the rails. Who will look after the children?

For many years, it has been a constant challenge to staff our child care with trained and qualified early-childhood educators. This is a shared challenge among licensed centres and it leaves organizations trying to patch together staffing as they face recruiting and retention issues.

The arrival of "big box" daycares in B.C. has only exacerbated the challenge, as they pay higher wages based on for-profit fees and developer incentives. However, they are not equitably accessible to all, nor widely inclusive of those with differing abilities.

Big-box daycare is a topic for another day. The real heart of the matter is that you can build new child-care centres, but who will staff them?

Here is the math — child-care spaces are staffed for three- to five-year-olds at a ratio of eight children per one educator; 22,000 new child-care spaces in B.C. would require 2,750 new educators graduating in the field within three years, 8,250 new educators within the next five years. The numbers would actually be higher, since the ratio for children under age three in licensed care actually drops to a 4:1 ratio.

Do you know how many ECEs Camosun College is hoping to graduate this year in its early learning and care program? Twenty-five.

I'm certain that some of the spaces that will be created will be unlicensed, but is that the landscape we want to create in our province: predominantly untrained, unlicensed, in-home daycares? In no way does this secure the quality of care that the promise of more spaces leads us to believe in. With all due respect to many wonderful unlicensed in-home child-care providers, the licensed child cares must meet specific requirements for health and safety, licence application, staffing qualifications, quality space and equipment, staff-to-child ratios and program standards.

Those staffing qualifications require two years of training. There are gifted, talented, committed, passionate people in the field. They are underpaid, under-appreciated and not given the professional recognition and respect they deserve. The bitter truth is that within five years of graduation, a high percentage of graduates leave the field they love to pursue higher wages and opportunities in other careers.

Mathematically, how do we staff our existing spaces, let alone 22,000 new spaces, let alone 66,000 new spaces? To everyone passionate about the issues of child care — yes, yes, yes, let's do it — but let's invest heavily in the infrastructure to support those 22,000 or 66,000 new spaces. Let's invest in the educators and create career opportunities that will attract 8,000 British Columbians to take up the great responsibility of making a difference in the life of each child, supporting each child to reach their potential in every area.

I am desperately hopeful that the plans being heralded focus on the full equation of "spaces plus professional staff equal child care."

Shelley Morris is CEO of the Cridge Centre for the Family, B.C.'s oldest continuously operating charity (since 1873). Among its many services, the Cridge Centre has been operating a 189-space child-care centre for children age six months to 12 years, for 46 years.

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