

Opinion: Don't let semantics stop momentum on child care ^[1]

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Source: Vancouver Sun

Format: Article

Publication Date: 20 Sep 2017

AVAILABILITY

Read online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

The early days of a new government are always tough. There are many choices at hand, decisions to be made and voters to please. In the case of B.C., the agreement between the province's NDP and the Green party adds a layer of intricacy that has not been present in decades.

Still, there is an issue that should not be allowed to fall through the cracks as a new premier and his government figure out the path of our province for the next four years: childcare.

During the provincial campaign, the NDP embraced the concept of \$10-a-day - a comprehensive plan to provide a regulated childcare space to every British Columbian parent or family who requires it. This is a plan that was years in the making, and carefully studied the experience of other jurisdictions.

This approach is already working in other parts of the country on several levels. Quebec currently boasts the second-lowest child poverty rate in Canada, and the highest rate of employment among women over the age of 20 in the entire country. In Quebec, having the ability to access childcare at a reasonable cost - originally \$7 a day, but since increased to up to \$21.20 a day, depending on household income - has allowed women to either return to the workforce at a faster pace after maternity leave ends, or to seek job opportunities that would otherwise have been unavailable.

Accessing childcare in B.C. is not easy, particularly in urban areas. One-in-four parents in Metro Vancouver interviewed by Insights West in December 2014 reported waits longer than 12 months before a space became available for their child. The lack of childcare spaces gave these parents three choices: rely heavily on relatives for childcare, consider an unlicensed facility or become a one-income household.

None of these three options is palatable. Grandparents - when present in the same city - obviously enjoy having their grandchildren around, but those we spoke to cringed at the idea of becoming de-facto weekday child minders. Unlicensed facilities can be dangerous. In cities as expensive as the ones in the Lower Mainland, having a parent stay at home full time will only lead to other sacrifices for the family. That's why more affordable and available childcare is needed now.

The worst thing that can happen to the debate over universal childcare is to get bogged down in semantics. Mentions of "early childhood education" might lead British Columbians to think that "childcare" is tantamount to "child minding". Nothing could be further from the truth. In B.C.'s licensed childcare centres, children learn, play, empathize and participate in group activities. They are taken care of not by nannies, but by teachers who deserve our respect and admiration.

My daughter recently entered Kindergarten after a couple of years in childcare. I know how lucky she is, at a time when only one-in-five children find a space in a regulated childcare facility in our province - and even fewer in Metro Vancouver. Without childcare, it would have been extremely difficult for her parents to enjoy opportunities for advancement in their careers. This is one of the reasons for British Columbians aged 18 to 34 to be the most likely to support the implementation of \$10-a-day (64 per cent, compared to the province-wide average of 55 per cent). They know that, particularly in cities where two-income households are the norm, each partner needs to have an opportunity to pursue a career.

Making childcare more affordable and available is sensible economic policy. I know what childcare meant for my family. I sincerely wish every British Columbian parent is eventually able to enjoy the same fortune. It is possible, if we leave semantics behind and focus on what matters: getting as many children to learn while their parents work.

-reprinted from Vancouver Sun

Region: British Columbia ^[3]

Tags: government ^[4]

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