

OUR VIEW: Child care should be a right, not a privilege ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

One billion dollars over three years.

It's such a mind-boggling amount of money that most of us can't begin to conceive of what it really means.

That's the amount of money that Finance Minister Carole James pledged for child care in the B.C. NDP's recent first budget.

And it's an amount of money that, sadly, won't be able to overcome the woefully inadequate patchwork of services that passes for a child-care system in our province. In fact, "system" is a misnomer on all fronts, since – as most parents in Burnaby and the rest of the Lower Mainland can attest – child care is more of a scramble-to-find-whatever-you-can-and-then-scrape-out-your-bank-account-to-pay-for-it migraine than it is an actual "system."

We applaud what James' first budget does to address many of the issues facing parents: the creation of a new child-care benefit for low- and middle-income families; the chance for daycare providers to opt in to fee-reduction programs; the creation of more than 22,000 new child-care spaces in the province.

Those changes will help. And they are welcome.

Now what we need, more than anything, is a total rethink. We need to re-envision, as a society, what child care means. Much as we embrace the idea of a universal public education system as a societal good, we need to embrace the idea of a universal public child-care system.

We need to consider child care not as a frill or a privilege, but as a right.

The education of children doesn't start when they reach the arbitrarily assigned age of five. It starts when they're born.

Giving parents of all income levels, all backgrounds and all walks of life an equal opportunity to find care that works for their family is equally as important as giving those families access to schools.

In a perfect world, the public education system and the child-care system wouldn't be two separate entities. They would be parts of an integrated whole that exists to support, nurture and educate children from their very earliest days on up.

In a perfect world, new schools would be built with integrated child care in mind.

In a perfect world, child-care workers would be recognized as the educators that they are – and compensated accordingly.

We're a long, long way from a perfect world.

But we're glad that, at last, we have a government that recognizes the need to start on a journey towards that ideal.

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