

University researchers urge province to take over daycare business ^[1]

Public system would better serve families and eventually pay for itself, MSVU researchers say

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EXCERPTS

Having a public daycare system in Nova Scotia would better serve the families who need it and could eventually pay for itself, two Halifax university researchers told a provincial legislature committee Thursday.

Tammy Findlay, chair of Political and Canadian studies at Mount St Vincent University, made a direct pitch to members of the standing committee on economic development.

"We need a public, universal and integrated system of early learning and child care," said Findlay, who studies child care policy.

- N.S. says it will create up to 1,000 new child-care spaces with \$35M from Ottawa ^[3]

She likened the move to the province's decision to create a program to bring four-year-olds into schools.

"When we create a pre-primary program, we don't give parents money and tell them to go find a pre-primary spot for their kids," she said. "We created a really great space for kids."

Her colleague, economist James Sawler, supported the call for public child care but for fiscal reasons.

Sawler pointed to a study by economist Pierre Fortin who examined the effects of Quebec's publicly run child care system.

"And he found that for every dollar that the Quebec government put into early childhood education, they got \$1.05 back," he said. "The federal government got an extra \$0.45. So that was just a bonus for the federal government."

He told the committee the figures were based on the fact the affordable spots allowed parents to work rather than stay home full-time.

"You have this increase in labour force participation, an increase in employment and incomes," he said. "Those people are paying income taxes, they're paying sales taxes and those funds then come back into the provincial government's coffers."

- Nova Scotia to add 130 more pre-primary classes by September ^[4]
- Only licensed full-day daycare in Queens County at risk of closing ^[5]

Sawler also said it is a good way to combat poverty.

"If you can participate in the labour force, if you can get a slightly decent wage, you can get your family and yourself above the poverty line."

Findlay said the current practice of the province subsidizing daycare spots isn't working.

"It has not on its own created spaces," she told the politicians. "It doesn't necessarily address affordability. Lots of parents don't qualify for subsidies and the subsidies don't cover — fully cover — the costs, so the costs can keep going up."

She said private daycare also creates a two-tiered system of child care, with wealthier parents accessing higher-end facilities.

"We don't like two-tiered systems in our other public services, like health care, and I think part of the problem with the subsidy system is it doesn't move us in the direction of universality."

Cathy Montreuil, deputy minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, didn't refute any of what the MSVU researcher had to say. Instead, Montreuil talked about the many ways the provincial government has tried to improve child care in the past several years.

"We're making good gains," she said.

Speaking to reporters later, she didn't dismiss the creation of a public system, but nor did she endorse the idea.

"At this point in time, I think we're still working our way forward to finding out the Nova Scotia solution and that may be where it ends up."

Montreuil said the department is focused on the continuing expansion of the pre-primary program which will take two more years to complete.

Asked specifically if that might include setting up a publicly run child-care system, the deputy minister would not be specific about what may happen in years to come.

"I'm new to the province and I can't tell you that I have those [answers] in my back pocket, however we are investing in early learning ... and this is the beginning."

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Region: Nova Scotia ^[6]

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