

Sask. gets failing grade for childcare policy: report ^[1]

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Source: Global News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 6 Feb 2019

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

A report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives gives the state of childcare in Saskatchewan a failing grade, saying outdated policies make accessing licensed care difficult for families, especially those with lower incomes.

“There’s a huge swath of lower income families and middle-income families that are too rich for subsidies and too poor to afford licensed quality childcare,” report co-author Jen Budney said.

Budney, who is also a postdoctoral fellow at the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, wrote the report card with recent sociology masters grad at the University of Saskatchewan, Courtney Carlberg.

Both also serve on the board of Saskatoon’s Spadina Early Learning and Childcare Co-operative. The co-op oversees four childcare centres across the city.

According to the report card, Saskatchewan’s more than 17,700 licensed childcare spaces are only enough for 18 per cent of children under the age of five. Seventy per cent of parents with children under five years old work.

Additionally, the subsidy program for low income families has not seen a significant change since the 1980s. For example, a two-parent household would have to make less than \$20,800 annually to claim the maximum benefit.

Working a full time job at minimum wage would earn \$23,004.80 annually before taxes.

“Even with full subsidy, you still have to pay ten per cent of childcare fees. So, if you have three kids in childcare; say one Kindergarten kid who needs part-time care, a toddler and an infant, your fees at even the most reasonable of licensed childcare facilities are still going to be over \$800 per month,” Budney explained.

A subsidy, which is run by the Ministry of Social Services, operates on a sliding scale for incomes above the maximum benefit level. In the 2017-18 fiscal year, around 2,000 families accessed the subsidy each month from a \$13 million pool.

“It really is about making sure that all the kids in the province have access to care when they need it,” Budney said.

The report notes that childcare is not a partisan issue, saying past Liberal, NDP, Conservative and Saskatchewan Party governments have failed to properly address childcare.

The Ministry of Education oversees childcare in the province. Early Years Branch executive director Janet Mitchell welcomes third party analysis like this report card from the left-leaning think tank.

“It’s important to have external people take a look at what we’re doing in childcare and we appreciate the work that they’ve done,” she said.

Currently, the province has 17,766 licensed child care spaces either in operation or in development.

In March 2018, the Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement with the federal government to add 2,500 childcare spaces by March 2020. So far, 1,119 have been allocated under the agreement.

Mitchell added that over 7,000 spaces have been allocated since 2007.

“By the end of next year, we actually will have had an increase of 76 per cent in the number of childcare spaces that have opened in Saskatchewan,” Mitchell said. “So that’s a pretty considerable number. We have to take into account the capacity of communities to develop those spaces as well.”

This capacity includes a number of factors, like existing building space and amount of people in the area qualified to provide licensed childcare.

Budney said that more spaces are helpful, but more needs to be done to properly address shortfalls.

The report card puts forward three recommendations for future planning: develop a more robust early childhood education strategy, move responsibility for all child care to a single ministry and a new strategy that puts emphasis on training and remuneration of childcare staff.

Related link: Developmental milestones: Child care fees in Canada's big cities 2018 ^[3]

Region: Saskatchewan ^[4]

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