

New Brunswick PCs achieve old daycare goal, thanks to Liberals

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Province announced it surpassed the 30,000-space goal last week

Author: Jones, Robert

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EXCERPTS

A promise made by New Brunswick Progressive Conservatives three elections ago to establish 30,000 licensed daycare spaces in the province was fulfilled earlier this month.

And although the Higgs government gave itself credit for hitting the milestone one year early, it actually comes five years late and only after the intervention of New Brunswick Liberals

"There are now 30,183 licensed child care spaces in the province," the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development announced last Thursday as part of Early Learning and Child Care week.

"The government committed in 2010 to increasing the total number of licensed child care spaces to 30,000 by 2020. As of June 1, there were 2,328 infant spaces, 12,185 preschool spaces and 15,670 school-age spaces licensed in the province."

The former Progressive Conservative government of David Alward did promise in 2010 to raise licensed daycare spaces in New Brunswick to 30,000, but the deadline it set to reach the goal was 2014 — not 2020.

"What time period are you looking at implementing these extra spaces," Alward was asked as he announced the 30,000-daycare-space plan in an August 2010 campaign appearance in Dieppe.

"This is an initiative for our first mandate," said Alward.

"We felt it was that important that we move forward in a very bold way and this becomes a corner stone of the development of our society."

Boosting spaces by 50%

Affordable daycare has long been promoted by multiple political parties as a social benefit. It helps parents, often young women, afford to enter the workforce and it financially supports those who decide to have children and raise families, something that has been in dramatic decline in New Brunswick for decades.

Alward's pledge to raise the number of daycare spaces in New Brunswick by 50 percent during his first term was one of the largest promises he made during the 2010 election but was soon abandoned.

The province did gain 6,000 spaces, but when Alward's government was defeated in the September 2014 general election, the province was still 5,000 spaces short of the promised amount.

At the time then Progressive Conservative Education Minister Marie-Claude Blais, who participated in the unveiling of the original promise, said there was simply not enough demand among young parents to support 30,000 spaces in New Brunswick.

"It's the industry that creates the space. You're not as an entrepreneur going to create space if there's no kids to fill those spaces," said Blais.

Liberals take on target

Progressive Conservatives did not recommit themselves to the daycare target in their 2014 election platform, but Liberals did, resetting the goal for 2020. They won and, eventually in 2018, the government of Brian Gallant unveiled a package of multimillion-dollar initiatives to upgrade daycares into "early learning centres" and increase subsidies for parents.

That helped Gallant's government increase the number of licensed spaces in the province by about 4,000 over his four-year term and surpass 29,000 spaces at the time of his defeat last November.

The Liberal daycare initiatives were then reviewed by the new government of Blaine Higgs and found to be beneficial. They were left in place, helping to push licensed daycare spaces over the 30,000 mark earlier this month.

"This is a Liberal program," new Progressive Conservative Education Minister Dominic Cardy said in January about his decision not to dismantle changes made by the Gallant government.

"This is one where the previous Liberal government deserves some credit for getting it going and I hope that we can earn some credit for making sure that ... it's continuing to move ahead."

Liberal MLA and education critic Chuck Chiasson said there is no doubt changes made by the previous government contributed significantly to hitting the 30,000 target — a point last week's announcement did not mention.

"I think it's this government trying to take all the credit for something they should not be taking all the credit for," said Chiasson.

"It's great that we've reached that milestone — it's important that we have sufficient daycare spaces."

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