

Manitoba families, daycare workers demand better child care as top 2019 election issue ^[1]

Hundreds met to march in support of better child care in the province

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EXCERPTS

Hundreds of Manitoba families and daycare workers gathered in Assiniboine Park on Tuesday evening to elevate child care as an election issue in the 2019 provincial race.

Under-served parents with children and staff demanding higher wages and more resources listened intently as candidates of all stripes lined up on stage at the park's Lyric Theatre to present their election promises to the crowd.

The forum organized by the Manitoba Child Care Association, a non-profit charity, preceded a 2.88-kilometre walk to draw further attention to daycare and early childhood education programs in the province.

"I know a lot of people are worried that what's promised is just going to be promised and then not actually fulfilled," said Tebogo Gillespie, a parent with two kids, aged one and three, who are both in daycare. Gillespie also works as an early childhood educator.

All four major political parties have released their child-care platforms amid extensive wait times to get children into programs, with more than 16,000 kids currently waiting for spaces to open up.

"None of the platforms really stand out to me," said Tristan Johnston, who is Gillespie's partner.

Johnston would like to see tax incentives for in-home daycares to fill the need for more spaces. He would also like more child-care spaces in public institutions, private facilities and retirement buildings that are affordable and accessible for lower income families — unlike a new private-public partnership in Sage Creek, which provides 74 spaces in the above-average income-bracket suburb.

"I'm more concerned about inner cities ... people who need it the most," Johnston said.

Mary Swain is an Anishinaabe woman originally from Swan Lake who has worked nearly 35 years as an ECE. She adores working in the field.

"The children are our future, and they're great," she said. "You see them every day, and they give you hugs."

Swain has worked simultaneously at two daycare centres for more than three decades — because one job doesn't cut it. Wages for early child-care educators start at \$15.50 per hour straight out of school. Swain said it can be difficult for centres to retain staff due to low pay.

In addition to better wages, Swain said it's time for the province to increase operating grants for child-care centres, which the Progressive Conservative government froze in 2016.

To fill the funding gap, Swain said the Lord Roberts Children's Program will start charging for their snack programs as of September. Parents and caregivers will have to pay out-of-pocket.

"It's going to be difficult for them, out of their budget," Swain said.

Meanwhile, people like her six-months-pregnant cousin have been trying to get spots on waiting lists for unborn children.

Taking risks

Christine Bibeau has two kids in a daycare centre.

"Child care is expensive, and it's hard to obtain," Bibeau said. She had to make the decision to put her kids in care so she could return to work.

It was a toss up for her.

"Your choices are, either you stay at home, or you have to deal with expensive child care," Bibeau said.

"It's insane," Bibeau said. "All your money goes into child care, and there's nothing left over, and you're stuck with not being able to pick, so if there's problems at your daycare, or whatnot, you have to really weigh it out."

It took three years on a waiting list to get her first son into daycare. All of her children were stuck on wait-lists before they got into programs. In the meantime, she said she ran the risk of putting them into unlicensed residential daycare.

"You have to put your faith into somebody to take your kids, and you're running a risk."

Party platform breakdown

The Manitoba NDP and the Green Party of Manitoba were the final of the four main parties to release their child-care plans on Tuesday, following announcements by the other two parties in the days prior.

Green Party Leader James Beddome pledged 2,000 new spaces over 10 years at a total cost of \$310 million. He said the Greens would maintain the non-profit nature of child care in Manitoba, pointing to Quebec's universal child-care system as a possible model to emulate.

Manitoba New Democrats promised to increase funding for not-for-profit daycares and to create new spaces in all new public buildings. Party Leader Wab Kinew estimated 600 spots per year would be a sustainable number for the party to build on.

The Manitoba Liberals would allocate tens of millions of dollars for 18,000 new spaces and higher wages for workers in the field. Leader Dougald Lamont said Monday he would also boost funding to child-care centres to ensure workers are well paid and to help improve literacy among young children.

Progressive Conservative Leader Brian Pallister said Sunday his party would offer up to \$500 for 3,000 low-income families to spend on child-care options of their choice, and continue partnering with the private sector to create new spaces.

Aligning priorities

Jodie Kehl is director of the Manitoba Child Care Association, a non-partisan registered charity that organized the event in the park on Tuesday.

Kehl's group values better funding for public early learning and child care, she said. The four key points are: affordability, accessibility, quality and workforce.

"It's interesting, now, to see the platforms come out and to see how they align with the priorities that we've identified."

What's missing, she said, is a better subsidy eligibility program.

"We do have a subsidized system, but even a family that's fully subsidized is still paying \$2 a day in child-care fees. That's too much for some families," Kehl said. Of course, she said, more child-care spaces are needed.

"A lot of parents that are successful enough in finding a child-care space are just thankful that they have a space."

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