

Opinion: Why quality child care must be an election issue ^[1]

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Canada is a little over a month away from the federal election and the main political parties are beginning to roll out their platforms. One issue that needs to be on the mind of Canadians in the run-up to the Oct. 21 federal election is quality child care and how different parties plan to address the significant need for further planning and investment for the early-learning and care sector.

Quality child care and the early-childhood educators who provide this critical service must be considered with any economic plan at both the federal and provincial levels. Supporting the early-learning and child-care workforce has many positive benefits for children, families and Alberta as a whole. An educated early-learning and child-care workforce is in a better position to meet the complex, growing needs of our children, developing a foundation for all future learning and development. It is already an issue bubbling over in all provinces and territories.

On Aug. 20, the Manitoba Child Care Association held a gathering that drew hundreds of families together in support of better child care. The intent was to draw further attention to early childhood education programs in the province and the crucial need for a better funding model, greater affordability, accessibility, quality, and a well-supported workforce. Alberta faces many of the same issues as Manitoba. In fact, most, if not all, of the provinces and territories struggle with a need for additional high-quality child-care spaces.

Not only are there not enough child-care spaces, the cost is out of reach for many families. In Edmonton, the median annual child-care cost for one child is between \$10,600 to \$11,880. In Calgary, this number rises to upward of \$15,000 annually, approximately double the yearly tuition cost of many post-secondary programs.

Families continue to struggle to balance work and family commitments, limiting the ability for both parents to remain in the workforce, especially families with multiple children. Child-care spaces must be affordable and accessible for families wherever they live and no matter their circumstance; affordability, however, often conflicts with quality provision. Accessibility and quality are reliant on an educated and competent workforce that is well-remunerated and supported for the important work they do.

Provinces continue to struggle to recruit and retain qualified early-childhood educators and the graduation numbers are not enough to fill the gap. In Alberta, staff turnover rates are high and the percentage of licensed child-care programs non-compliant with the Child Care Licensing Act and Regulation is approximately 27 per cent (Children's Services Business Plan 2017-20).

The cost to organizations/businesses is significant; the cost to children, families and Alberta's other systems (education, health, justice) are even more significant.

Too often, we hear from women having to give up their own profession as they are unable to find or afford child care. Alberta needs these women in the workforce for many reasons, but most importantly to contribute to its economy. For example, while Alberta's labour force participation for those aged 25-64 is 84.8 per cent, its labour force participation rate for women lags significantly behind. In 2017, approximately 72 per cent of female workers were employed full-time in Alberta compared to 89.5 per cent of male workers.

Federally, political parties need to show a commitment to early-childhood educator workforce planning and increasing investment in early learning and child care to help make labour force participation or completion of studies more affordable for families.

High-quality child care helps to build strong communities, helps newcomers integrate into their new communities, fosters appreciation and respect for diversity, helping young children engage and contribute to their own communities, now and in the future.

Related link:

Region: Alberta ^[3]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/19/10/opinion-why-quality-child-care-must-be-election-issue> [2] <https://edmontonjournal.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-why-quality-child-care-must-be-an-election-issue> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7859> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-election>