

# Manitoba child-care model has growing up to do: parents, experts <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Winnipeg Free Press

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 26 Oct 2019

## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

A lack of child-care spaces cost Sara Singer a month's pay in August. The working mom of two had to stay home with her 13-month-old son, Ryker.

Singer registered online for 95 per cent of the child-care centres in Transcona when she was six months pregnant. Nineteen months later, she still hasn't received a call.

"The second that you find out you're pregnant, you pretty much need to put your name on the list," she said. "And even then, you still might not hear back in time."

A 2016 report from the Manitoba Child Care Association (MCCA) found 14 to 15 months is the average wait time for a parent once they join a wait list.

Singer found an in-home daycare for Ryker one month after her yearlong maternity leave ended. She said she is grateful the construction company where she works took her back as a safety co-ordinator. But the month without income wasn't easy, she said.

"It's not just Ryker I had to worry about," Singer said. "I have bills, car payments, I have my daughter and she's in hockey and swimming. You have all these bills coming up and it's super stressful."

A recent Statistics Canada survey showed 51.9 per cent of Manitobans have difficulty finding child care — the highest percentage in the country. Forty-one per cent of parents in the same survey said they had to delay returning to work because they weren't able to find care.

According to the MCCA, there were 16,861 children on the online childcare registry waiting list as of June 30, 2017.

Earlier this year, the MCCA sent out a petition which netted 26,000 signatures of support in four weeks.

It was aimed at pushing the provincial government to increase operating revenue for child-care programs.

Jodie Kehl, the MCCA's executive director, said parents, instructors, unions, early childhood educators and other Manitobans were among those to sign.

"It's an unprecedented number, from what I've been told by several MLA's," the 49-year-old said. "Never in the history of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly had they seen such a high response in such a short period of time."

The petition's popularity suggests Manitobans clearly see a need to improve the system.

They could look to other countries to see how to do it.

Sweden's municipalities, by law, have to find a spot for every child within three months of being on a wait list. In Manitoba, parents like Singer said it's solely on the parent to find care for their child.

Children in Sweden don't miss out on important early childhood learning years the way some Manitoba children do while waiting for a child-care spot.

Allyson Greenhalgh, a Manitoba mother and early childhood educator (ECE), said she sees first-hand how important the first year of learning and development is.

"My daughter went to daycare at age one and she's so independent. My son went to daycare when he was three — not independent," said Greenhalgh, 43. "Those early years have a huge impact and I see that in my own children."

Manitoba experts who have seen the Swedish model in action sing its praises.

Susan Prentice has been researching child care since 1985 and currently is a member of the federal government's expert panel on early learning and child-care data and research.

Prentice is also a sociology professor at the University of Manitoba. She said she saw how well the Swedish child-care system worked while she was there on sabbatical.

"In Sweden, child care is seen as a child and family right," the 57-year-old said. "They go down to city hall and they say, 'I'm going to need daycare in a couple of months,' and they get in because they have that right."

As of 2015, more than 90 per cent of all 18-month-to-five-year-old children were in daycares in Sweden according to Cardus, an Ontario non-partisan, faith-based think tank.

Daycare in Sweden is tax-subsidized, while in Manitoba, you have to be a fairly low-income family to meet the subsidy requirements. And even then, people will pay \$2 a day to cover the non-subsidized fee that facilities may charge.

"If you walk into (a child-care centre) in Sweden, you'd be dazzled," Prentice said. "The staff is really well-trained, all the kids are there and it's not just the kids of working moms, everybody's there and the quality is high."

She can't say the same for here.

"In Manitoba, we say two-thirds of staff should have a two-year early childhood education degree," Prentice said. "Except 30 per cent of Manitoba child-care centres have an exemption to their licence that allows them to operate without the right number of trained staff."

Prentice acknowledged hurdles Manitoba might face if it were to look at putting a similar system in place.

Canada is a federation of 10 provinces, three territories plus Indigenous governments, while Sweden is a unitary state with two levels of government.

Prentice said her research has found that unitary states often have better child-care coverage than federations like Canada and the United States, where state- and provincial-level jurisdictions are an extra hurdle to overcome.

Prentice and Greenhalgh agree there needs to be more funding if Manitoba's child-care system is to improve.

The federal government has agreed to fund Manitoba child-care systems with \$15 million per year for three years beginning in 2018. If Manitoba is to enact a similar system to Sweden, the federal government will need to continue to take the lead.

Parents, like Singer, also have ideas about where the funding should go.

"I think they need to offer better, and more buildings," Singer said. "I think the government should support that and give them more benefits to opening something to help people in those areas go to work every day."

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