

B.C. NDP government is still a long way from meeting its promise of universal \$10-a-day child care ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

Life in British Columbia's Lower Mainland is expensive. The high cost of housing is widely known, but another outsized bill is the cost of child care, which ranks among the highest in the country.

The provincial NDP eked into government in 2017, promising to make life more affordable. Among the main pillars of its platform was \$10-a-day child care.

The \$10-a-day banner is a mythic and unrealized figure in most of Canada. It's based on Quebec's long-standing child-care program, which is cheap for parents, but heavily subsidized by taxpayers.

While the BC NDP's platform did promise to "bring in" \$10-a-day care, the party was cautious about timing. It wasn't promised immediately, or for every child – there simply wasn't room in the budget for that much new spending, that quickly. The initial focus was to be on low-income families, and kids under the age of 2. The party also said it had no intention of blowing up the existing patchwork of care, from licensed family homes to other operators.

In power, the minority NDP government has been cautious. It can claim to have made progress on increasing access to low-cost child care, but the results so far illustrate the challenges of making a big difference without spending big amounts of money.

In 2017, when the NDP came into office, 108,000 child-care spaces in the province were receiving at least some government funding – a figure that had been slowly rising under the previous Liberal government. Since then, the number of spaces has increased to about 119,000.

Beyond funding more spaces, the NDP also provides money directly to families, and it has expanded one program to cover middle-income households earning up to \$111,000.

The centrepiece is what the NDP calls their "universal child care prototype sites," which charge \$10 a day. There are 2,500 spots across 53 sites, funded by federal transfers. They include a range of business models, from non-profits to private care. But, as in Quebec, where the province's main child-care centres have long waiting lists, there are already 12,000 children waiting for B.C.'s prototype spots, with some lists capped owing to demand.

Today, about 27,000 children are getting daycare for \$10 a day (or less), up from 22,000 before the NDP took government. It is a meaningful gain, but it's not close to being a universal program.

The cost of this limited progress has so far been modest. The province is spending \$366-million on child care this fiscal year and has budgeted \$473-million for 2020-21. That's up from \$223-million spent in 2016-17, the last year of Liberal government.

B.C. is not the only province making moves on child care – Newfoundland and Labrador has reduced costs for parents in recent years. And B.C.'s increased child-care spending has been partly financed by the federal government.

Ottawa's early learning and child-care plan dates back to the early 2000s. It disappeared under the Conservatives, but was relaunched in 2017 by the Trudeau government.

Initially offering \$400-million a year for the provinces, the money is now part of a 10-year, \$7-billion plan. B.C.'s \$10-a-day prototype sites depend on this federal cash, about \$50-million a year.

The challenge is that making child care cheaper for parents means a lot of costs are put on taxpayers. Quebec spends roughly \$2.5-billion a year – more than quintuple B.C.'s planned spending. If B.C. wants a program as extensive as Quebec's, it is going to have to spend considerably more.

Canada's Child Care Advocacy Association argued last April that early learning child care is "in a perpetual state of crisis" – a shortage of

spaces, high fees, varying quality and tough working conditions. Meanwhile, TD Economics has said numerous studies show the benefits of investments in child care “far outweigh the costs.”

The median price of child care for an infant or toddler in the city of Vancouver was more than \$60 a day in 2018, according to an annual national survey by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. The NDP government’s increased spending on child care is believed to have reduced that price, but only somewhat.

That means backers and opponents of universal, taxpayer-subsidized, \$10-a-day child care can at least agree on one thing: B.C. is still a long way off from having it.

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