

# Pandemic punctures child-care illusion <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Who knew child care would punch through as a key priority in a global pandemic? The illusion that child care is a simple and private family matter has been shattered by swiftly moving events. For years, Canadian governments could treat child care as a marginal issue of low priority; that consensus is now gone.

Last week, the Winnipeg Free Press rightly editorialized that parents now face "logistical problems" and an "urgent child-care crunch."

Child-care services are essential for working parents, meaning that what we used to call "daycare" is critical for economic functioning. Yet Manitoba, like nearly all of Canada's jurisdictions, lacks the practical policy levers and mechanisms to ensure parents have the services they need.

We have a space for fewer than one in five children who might need one; more than 16,600 names are already on the central registry, waiting for a space.

Why are the policy tools missing? Nearly all centre-based child-care services are delivered by the charitable and volunteer sector, and a smaller number by commercial entrepreneurs. Neither the province, the city of Winnipeg, nor any other level of government directly owns and operates a single child-care space.

There is no government role in planning where child-care services open (or close), whether they serve infants or school-agers, whether they operate for a full day or part-time. Manitoba provides more operational funding to child-care services than most provinces, but centres are nevertheless financially stretched.

By contrast, Quebec has been able to respond much more quickly to the crisis, largely because child care there is better-funded and more available.

As nurses, respirologists, physicians, paramedics, midwives, pharmacists, police and fire, first-responders and others in occupations ranging from grocery checkout clerks to postal workers try to figure out how to keep going in a pandemic where they are vitally needed, they discover their child-care arrangements are fragile and built on a shaky foundation.

On March 20, Manitoba announced some measures to try to address the child-care crisis and to ensure public health. One step is \$7.6 million to centres so they can each keep up to 16 spaces open, with a first priority to children of health-care and other essential workers.

Although this will barely fund three weeks, it is a short-term lifeline for chronically underfunded centres and their low-paid educators.

Gobsmackingly, more than twice as much money is earmarked for care that doesn't even exist yet. Manitoba is betting more than \$18 million on home-based care that will be created on the fly. The province is hoping early-childhood educators reeling from layoffs will suddenly become entrepreneurs and set up home-based businesses.

Relying on individual women in their private homes (or, sometimes, working as a team of two) — where a variety of family members and other potential virus-carriers come and go — to provide a safe public service seems ludicrous. Why set up a parallel system when existing services could — with proper support — be redeployed?

Much better would be to ensure that existing non-profit centres have the funding they need to safely care for the children of essential workers. These licensed and regulated centres already meet provincial licensing, safety, and quality standards — but they would require a serious infusion of funds to operate safely and sustainably with drastically lower enrolment.

Rather than do this, Families Minister Heather Stefanson has just dedicated millions to help the hoped-for new care providers buy "a fire extinguisher or first aid kit," suggesting just how unprepared these care providers will be.

A thousand important operational questions remain unanswered, effectively throwing the stressed early-learning and child-care field under the bus. But one thing is clear: we should not expect citizens — nearly always women — to work for scandalously low wages and in perhaps unsafe conditions while providing an essential service. This is modern-day piecework as the template for child care — and it must be rejected.

Manitoba must quickly move into the 21st century of caregiving. We need to develop a robust system of public management of child-care programs that are solidly funded. Toronto, for example, with an extensive network of municipally owned and operated child-care centres, is in a much better position to co-ordinate a citywide response — something that is simply impossible in Manitoba, given today's policy architecture.

Most importantly, this crisis makes it clear that we are at the end of the hoary illusion that child care is just a private matter. For the same reasons we build public services in other sectors, we need to redesign child-care policy. High-quality child care is at the heart of the 21st century economy and modern family realities.

Pandemic or not, without this political understanding, we will never implement the policy mechanisms and infrastructure that early learning and child care requires.

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