

Federal leadership can play a key role in addressing Alberta's child care woes ^[1]

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Many areas of public services have been in the spotlight across Canada during the current COVID-19 crisis. For struggling parents, early childhood educators, and service providers in Alberta, the arrival of the COVID crisis has forcefully highlighted why a new way needs to be found to support tenuous child care services if Alberta is to thrive economically after the pandemic.

Child care is an essential service that was already in flux in Alberta with the expiration of the first phase of funds through the Early Learning and Child Care bilateral agreements the federal government signed with each province/territory three years ago. With cessation of ordinary economic activity, however, the COVID crisis has pushed many of Alberta's child care services to the verge of collapse, with mass staff layoffs and parents paying fees to hold spaces at closed services. Yet the Alberta government has been reluctant to commit to shoring up the child care sector with effective fiscal and policy remedies, as some other provinces have done.

Now more than ever, all this suggests that the federal government's promise to re-negotiate new funding agreements with the provinces is a valuable opportunity to make much-needed progress for children and families in Alberta.

In 2016, the previous NDP government in Alberta launched a pilot project funding a number of not-for-profit Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) centres to cap parent fees at \$25-a-day. These were partly funded by the federal government through the bilateral agreement now nearing its end. While this program is relatively small in scale (funding 122 centres), it shows that a government can make significant progress on affordability, accessibility, and quality of care when it makes it a priority.

The Alberta United Conservative Party (UCP) government led by Premier Jason Kenney was silent about child care during last year's provincial election; the party's platform did not make a single mention of it. Yet less than a year later, they cut two child care grants, scrapped the accreditation program for child care operators, and told the \$25-a-day centres to expect that their funding would be coming to an end.

A recent report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives shows that child care fees in cities across most of the country are difficult for most families to afford, with Quebec standing out as the exception to this rule due to their significant public funding and regulation of fees. In Alberta, median monthly fees for infants are \$1,075 and \$1,300 per child in Edmonton and Calgary respectively. As a result, many parents, usually mothers, are forced to stay home even if they have the desire, education, and experience to be in the workforce.

In addition, many are increasingly asking the question, "affordability of what?" That is, what level of quality is the care being provided? Do the early childhood educators (ECEs) in the child care centre have a high enough level of education in the field, as well as professional development opportunities? Are ECE-educated staff paid enough to stay in the field and make a career out of it? The early childhood research literature tells us two important things about this: first, the state of the workforce is the key determinant of whether or not care provided in the centre promotes children's well-being, development, learning, and quality of life. And second, it is not possible to pay adequate enough wages needed to attract and retain quality ECE staff if their wages are heavily reliant on parent fees. The \$25-a-day pilot centres, with substantial operational funding, were designed to illustrate how public funding could change this equation for parents, who need affordable child care, and staff, who need decent wages.

The significant cuts to child care in Alberta run counter to the mandate the UCP government ran on in 2019— strengthening the economy. Even before the COVID crisis, it was obvious that people who work need child care to be available, affordable, and high quality, so they can go to work knowing their children are getting the care they need. The Alberta government's approach before the crisis, however, was one leading to less affordable parent fees and lower quality care, as operators would be forced to cut staff wages, and beleaguered educators would need to look elsewhere for employment.

The COVID pandemic has made it clear that child care is an essential service for Canadians, yet federal and provincial governments, including Alberta's, have rarely treated it that way. The federal government must build on the lessons provinces are learning during the COVID crisis and transform child care across the country into what it really is – a public good.

Thus, the federal government should see the Alberta's ELCC situation as an opportunity to reverse the direction and reframe its investments as part of boosting the province's economy. The federal government can do this by making its funding contingent on provincial actions that can demonstrably improve accessibility, affordability and quality, as the bilateral agreements were intended to do.

New bilateral agreements will be able to avoid direct-to-parent payments or individual fee subsidies, both of which are shown to be ineffectual in addressing affordability or quality issues. Instead the federal government should expect provinces to focus on properly funding child care operators to provide better access to higher quality care with affordable fees for families. This means investing in the

child care and early learning workforce by increasing qualifications and professional development opportunities for staff, and by funding wage increases to ensure trained staff are retained in the field, instead of needing to look for higher paying work elsewhere.

The federal government should be laying the groundwork for a Canada Health Act-like approach to child care – using the leverage of significant federal funding to incentivize provinces to build high quality, affordable, and accessible public child care systems that are available to every family, regardless of their ability to pay. Not only do Alberta’s children and families deserve this but it is crucial to support Alberta’s economic re-building.

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Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/blog/federal-leadership-can-play-key-role-addressing-alberta%E2%80%99s-child-care-woes> [2]

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