

Opinion: COVID-19 crisis shows the importance of early child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The UCP government's recent announcement to re-open child-care centres for essential workers highlighted the important role of child care during this crisis and in our society in general. Accessible quality child care is vital for ensuring workers are able to fully participate in our economy and in some cases to ensure core service workers can go to work.

COVID-19 has shown that rather than cutting and deregulating early learning and child care, the UCP needs to shift their focus to finally creating a universal system for Albertans. The importance of early learning and child care became even more obvious during the pandemic as child-care centres closed in an effort to slow the spread.

Without these child-care centres open, many workers, most often women, were not able to return to their jobs, and what we have learned during this crisis is that many of these workers are pivotal to our society, including nurses, teachers, grocery workers, lab techs, critical-infrastructure workers, first responders and even child-care workers themselves.

The UCP re-opening child care centres to help ensure essential workers can return or remain at work is a decision worth applauding. Yet, there are still key issues that have been left unaddressed for how essential workers will access the care they need, including high and inconsistent fees and a lack of spaces and hours.

It is completely unacceptable for any provincial government to ask essential workers to risk their own health while now being put in the position of having to pay higher child-care fees to ensure they can go to work, so that the rest of us may get through this pandemic. Unfortunately, this pattern of refusing to recognize the important role child care plays in allowing Albertans to do their work is a common theme for this government, whether during a pandemic or otherwise.

After announcing the cuts of the kin child-care subsidy and the stay-at-home parent subsidy in November, the UCP announced another round of cuts to child-care services for Albertans in early December 2019. As of April 1, 2020, the UCP has cut the benefit contribution grant and the staff-attraction incentive for daycare centres.

In early March, Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz announced the UCP is cutting Alberta's child-care accreditation program. The accreditation program is one of the only ways families and parents in Alberta have to evaluate the quality of care provided at a centre or day home. This move is a gigantic step backwards in terms of providing more quality child care and puts the future of early learning and child care in Alberta at risk.

And just a few weeks ago, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UCP pushed through a budget that continues the de-funding of the \$25-per-day Early Learning and Child Care Centres pilot program, meaning some of these centres will have to close, and at others, families will pay hundreds of dollars more per month.

These Early Learning and Child Care Centres are being de-funded in spite of the fact that the first phase of the pilot program received an overwhelming positive government review completed by R.A. Malatest and Associates. This review found that the program had an overall positive impact on family and child well-being, it improved accessibility and affordability for quality child care for Albertans, and improved the quality of care in these centres. They found that the first phase of the pilot program supported hundreds of Albertans to enter or re-enter the workforce.

The UCP's ideological attacks on child care are only making a bad situation worse for working Albertans.

All kids deserve a fair start. Yet, Alberta's inconsistent, expensive, and incomplete delivery of child care means that many kids are being left behind, an ongoing situation only amplified during this public health emergency.

The UCP government needs to step up and provide quality and accessible child care for essential workers now, and coming out of this pandemic quality child care needs to be expanded so that it is accessible to all Alberta families, ensuring that all working Albertans can fully

participate in our economy.

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