

As Canadian economy reopens, will child care be there to support working parents? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Just over one-third of child-care centres and licensed home daycares across Canada are not sure they will be able to reopen when provincial governments begin to reboot their economies, according to a national survey.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has cast early learning and child care in a new light for many Canadians — as an essential service necessary for rebuilding a well-functioning economy,” says the survey to be released Wednesday.

“However, the Canadian child-care sector suffered from a confusing, uneven and often less-than-adequate approach by governments to supporting services and parents” during the crisis, says the survey of more than 8,000 centres and licensed homes, representing operators in every province and territory.

The research is an attempt to quantify the degree of uncertainty facing the sector, said Don Giesbrecht, of the Canadian Child Care Federation, which conducted the survey with the Toronto-based Childcare Resource and Research Unit and Child Care Now, a national advocacy group.

“We know programs have gone deep into reserves to keep operating, and now we are concerned that as we reopen, we won’t have the revenues and funding from governments to bridge those gaps,” said Giesbrecht, whose organization represents child-care operators and staff across the country.

The survey results reflect the differences between how jurisdictions have responded to the needs of child-care programs during the health crisis.

In Quebec, Nova Scotia, P.E.I. and Newfoundland, provincial governments have covered daycare costs — including staff wages — while parent fees were suspended.

British Columbia has supported shuttered child-care centres by paying fixed operating costs, such as rent or lease payments, but there has been no funding to replace parent fees. Alberta, meanwhile, has offered no extra support to centres.

Ontario is providing “stabilization” funding to licensed centres and homes. But late last month, Queen’s Park said provincial grants could not be used to cover rent or staff salaries while centres are closed, a policy that caught many programs by surprise.

The report comes in the wake of Ottawa’s June 5 announcement that it is giving \$14 billion to the provinces to help defray costs related to testing, sick pay, child care and other expenses related to reopening the economy.

But so far, the federal government has been silent on whether any of the money will be earmarked specifically for child care, said Morna Ballantyne, of Child Care Now.

“We think if this initial funding is tied to direct services, it will set the path that we want future funding to take,” she said in an interview. “We want child care to be reconstructed as a publicly funded service that is high quality, available, accessible and affordable to all as opposed to the market-based system we have now.

“This survey bears out the consequences of uneven policy approaches across the country and the central importance of public funding,” Ballantyne added.

Amy O’Neil, director of Toronto’s Treetop Children’s Centre, said she doesn’t know if her daycare in Oriole Park Jr. Public School will be able to reopen.

“We are going to be in huge financial difficulty,” she said of centre that serves 155 children from age 2 1/2 to 12. “We have continued to pay staff salaries at 100 per cent, and we have depleted all of our reserves.”

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