

Child-care providers hope COVID-19 leads to universal access in Nova Scotia ^[1]

Advocates say free child care means more people working, better outcomes for families

Author: Gorman, Micheal

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EXCERPTS

Child-care providers and advocates in Nova Scotia say COVID-19 has shown the future of the sector in this province and that future should include universal access.

As the coronavirus arrived in the province in March, public health orders shut down a variety of sectors, including licensed daycares. But at a time when other provinces were seeing massive layoffs in the sector, Premier Stephen McNeil's government prevented that here by ensuring people's spots were protected and providers' bills were entirely paid by dipping into provincial coffers to cover parent fees.

Beyond the normal funding to providers, which includes grants and subsidies, the province has spent \$21 million to cover parent fees during the public health order, something that will continue until Sept. 1 or until a child returns to their daycare.

With daycares allowed to reopen beginning June 15, advocates say the ability to have universal coverage in this province has been made evident, and the suggestion it's not financially viable dispelled.

"There are social policies that we take as a given," said YWCA executive director Miia Suokonautio, listing items such as public education and free dental checks for children.

"And yet if you lived in another jurisdiction that didn't have those things, we'd perceive it as extraordinary. And so for me, I feel like there are jurisdictions that don't require the type of fees for child care that we do."

Nova Scotia's pre-primary program is already a form of universal child care, said Suokonautio. The program for four year olds is scheduled to become provincewide in September at a cost of \$51.4 million a year.

McNeil and Education Minister Zach Churchill have said the money is well spent because it helps level the playing field for kids in the year before they enter the public school system.

With ample research to show the majority of single parents receiving income assistance are single mothers, and often they need that support to help cover the costs of child care so they can also go to work, Suokonautio said the argument for universal access has never been stronger.

"Low-income households who have their kids in child care are often paying more for child care, even with subsidies, than they do for rent," she said.

In two-parent households, it can often mean the mother stays home. That might reduce child-care costs, but it also reduces a family's ability to bring in money and improve their financial situation, as well as aid an economy that's in the midst of trying to restart after being hammered by the pandemic, said Jewell Mitchell, executive director of the Nova Scotia College of Early Childhood Educators.

Mitchell said universal access would appropriately lead into the public school system.

"If we want to build our economy, if we want it to come back and it be stronger and even more resilient in the future, then you build in those first five years and you make sure that the whole infrastructure around care and learning for our children until they reach their adulthood is taken care of and is secure and is equitable and accessible for all citizens," she said.

Concerns about lack of planning

Initially, daycares will be able to operate beginning June 15 at up to 50 per cent capacity when they reopen, with the ability to increase that as comfort and public health protocols are satisfied.

There are concerns, however, that the approach, along with reduced capacities or outright cancellations at day camps this summer, will hinder parents' ability to return to work. On Friday, McNeil said his government would look at ways to help, should available spaces not

satisfy the level of need.

However, opposition party leaders said that's something that should have been settled before the reopening plan for businesses was even announced. Many businesses in the province were able to reopen June 5.

"I think this is an area where the government has kind of shown that they didn't really understand the impact of access to daycare and to child care on the restart of the economy," said Tory Leader Tim Houston.

"They didn't understand how important it was."

Houston said he's willing to talk about universal child care, but wants to make sure single parents and low-income families are taken care of before looking at a new blanket coverage approach.

Belief change can happen

NDP Leader Gary Burrill said there remains "a garbage bag full of unanswered questions" when it comes to child care reopening in the short term.

He said the pandemic has made clear that for the economy to reach its full potential, child care must become universal and that the province has the capacity to fund it. Anything less shortchanges families and the economy, said Burrill.

"In effect, what you're saying is you're prepared to let large numbers of people, primarily women, be forced out of the labour force in order to stay home and look after the kids," he said.

Suokonautio said the government's support of the sector during the pandemic, along with its commitment to pre-primary, gives her hope that it might finally be ready to discuss universal child care.

"If we know the education and child-care system has such overriding benefits on participation in the workforce, children's outcomes, early identification of any disabilities and learning needs, why wouldn't we do that?" she said.

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