

A strategy for recovery: Making affordable child care for ALL a reality ^[1]

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Excerpted from strategy

The need for child care has never been made clearer,”
—Prime Minister Justin Trudeau

Never has child care been more vulnerable, and more essential.

It has taken a public health crisis for the essential role of early learning and child care (ELCC) to be widely recognized, and for the fragility of Canada’s provision to be laid bare.

ELCC in Canada was fragile before the epidemic because it is market-based, fragmented and under-funded. Most licensed programs primarily rely on parent fee revenue. The predominantly female workforce earns low wages and any raise in compensation translates into higher parent fees, as do any other quality improvements. As a result, recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood educators is a perpetual serious concern.

Almost all provinces/territories ordered child care programs to close during the pandemic (with limited services for essential workers), and then took different and changing approaches to supporting the sector through the shutdown. A recent survey of licensed child care centres confirms that 70% laid off all or part of their workforce during the pandemic, and one-third of the centres across Canada are uncertain about reopening. Child care could lose thousands of educators who will not return to low-wage work in child care when other employment opportunities open up again.

Time to update Canada’s plan for early learning and child care

The construction of an accessible, affordable, quality, inclusive system of ELCC, with fairly compensated early childhood educators at the heart, is now essential if Canada is to forge a resilient and just future, and also become the best possible place for children.

Millions of workers have lost their jobs and income because of the pandemic. A sustainable economic recovery relies on their ability to regain their earning power. But before parents of young children can return to work, they need access to affordable child care programs that meet their diverse needs. This is particularly true for mothers who have suffered disproportionately through the pandemic.

Federal leadership, including bold, accelerated federal spending is needed to expedite Canada’s move from the market-based provision of ELCC to a publicly managed and fully publicly funded system.

How we get there

Our strategy updates and builds on our Affordable Child Care for ALL plan. It calls for a two-phased approach by the federal government in the aftermath of COVID-19.

- In the first phase, the plan calls for \$2.5 billion for ELCC in new federal transfers to the provinces/territories and Indigenous communities to support the safe and full recovery of regulated child care as part of the reopening of the economy.
- In the second phase, the plan proposes ELCC spending of \$2 billion in 2021-22. This base would be increased each year after by \$2 billion (that is, \$4 billion in 2022-23, \$6 billion in 2023-24, etc.). The federal funds would be used to move Canada towards a fully publicly funded system, in partnership with the provinces/territories and Indigenous governments.
- The federal government would require the provinces and territories to use the federal funds to achieve measurable improvements in accessibility, affordability, quality and inclusiveness.

- Additionally, the federal government would establish and fund a federal ELCC Secretariat to lead and co-ordinate the federal government's ELCC work.
- Finally, the government would propose to Parliament legislation that enshrines Canada's commitment to give all children the right to high quality early learning and child care. Similar to the Canada Health Act, the legislation would set out the principles, conditions and accountability mechanisms for federal transfer payments to provinces/territories.

Phase 1 (through March 31, 2021)

The federal government has promised \$14 billion in new federal transfers to the provinces and territories, to be rolled out over the remaining months of 2020, to help finance the safe restart of the economy. Prime Minister Trudeau says the agreement will provide federal funding for child care "so that every parent knows there is a safe place for their kids."

Under the first phase of our plan, the federal government would allocate \$2.5 billion of these promised transfers for spending on early learning and child care. The provinces and territories would use the funds to augment, not replace, the public funding ELCC programs now receive. Agreements with each province/territory would ensure that the federal funds are used for:

- A safe restart of child care programs
- Restoration and expansion of the number of licensed child care and early learning spaces that existed prior to the pandemic
- The establishment and operation of child care programs for school-age children up to age 12 through the summer months and into the fall and winter. Parents need access to quality programs before and after school hours, and/or during regular school hours if schooling is not available because of public health concerns.
- Increases in wages and other compensation for those who work in early learning and child care to ensure the return and retention of ELCC staff to the sector
- Stabilization of parent fees and reductions to the extent possible

The federal Secretariat that has been mandated by the Prime Minister of Canada would be established during this first phase. Its mandate would be to advise on, monitor and evaluate the Phase 1 implementation, and plan for Phase 2, including the development of comprehensive workforce and expansion strategies.

Phase 2 (starting April 1, 2021)

Our plan would boost the federal allocation for ELCC to \$2 billion in 2021-22 and add a further \$2 billion each year thereafter, earmarking 20 per cent of the annual total to support implementation of the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework.

In this second phase of ELCC system construction, the focus would be on expanding availability of licensed child care, making ELCC more affordable, and improving the quality of programs primarily through the development and implementation of a workforce strategy and application of the best available evidence.

To make progress on these fronts, the federal government would negotiate bilateral funding agreements with each of the provinces/territories. These agreements would provide for federal funds to be directed to enhancing the public management of ELCC, and to increasing operational (supply-side) funding of early learning and child care programs.

During Phase 2, federal ELCC legislation enshrining Canada's commitment to high quality early learning and child care for all children would be introduced. The legislation would set out the principles, conditions and accountability mechanisms for federal transfer payments to provinces/ territories.

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