

How Justin Trudeau could turn the WE Charity scandal into a win ^[1]

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EXERPTS

Here's a riddle to start your weekend.

What kind of program could put hundreds of millions of government dollars to productive use for the sake of young people, safe employment during the pandemic, inclusive growth and make the federal Liberals look good?

No, not a contract for WE charity.

The answer is: child care, for youngsters and school-age children alike.

Just over a week ago, federal and provincial governments agreed on how they would spend \$19 billion on safely restarting the economy, and they decided to dedicate \$625 million of that fund to taking care of kids. On Friday, Social Development Minister Ahmed Hussen said the money would start flowing soon.

It's not enough of either money or strategy given the challenge at hand.

But if the Liberals want a chance to redeem themselves after the political damage of the WE controversy and check off many of the same boxes that were initially in mind during the early days of that project's design, imagine what they could do by reallocating some of the \$900 million Ottawa intended to give to WE to administer the student grant program, but which is now languishing in federal coffers.

That \$900 million was supposed to do a bunch of things: help youth make ends meet, help fragile charities stay afloat during the pandemic, develop young people's skills so they don't falter during the recession and are well-placed to lead economic growth in the future, reach marginalized groups.

Spending on child care has many of the same compelling attributes, plus a few more — with the added bonus of not being any more controversial than motherhood and apple pie.

As many an expert has noted, the economy can't recover in a meaningful way unless the workforce — including parents of young and school-age children — are able to go back to work, and for that, they need safe, affordable care for their kids.

Without it, companies will be missing vital chunks of their workforce and kids will be missing out on vital chunks of their development. Parents trying to juggle work, child care and home-schooling will lose their minds if they haven't already. And over the long term, women who have worked so hard to stake their claim in the workforce and have been responsible for much of Canada's prosperity over the past few decades will suffer long-lasting setbacks.

But if federal and provincial authorities work together with funding and quick planning, safe and available care for kids will allow the economy to get back on its feet and also set the stage for a strong next generation.

Hussen echoed all of those sentiments on Friday, recognizing that in order for those child care facilities to operate safely, they'll need more staff, more space, more personal protective equipment, and enough money to make up for the deep hole in their revenues. He says all the right things.

He also insists that the funding is ample and ready to work. On top of the \$625 million in federal-provincial "safe restart" funding, the federal government has sewn up agreements with all the provinces to allow an extra \$400 million in previously budgeted funding to start flowing. Taken together, it's the most the federal government has ever spent in a single fiscal year on child care.

But the need to get this right, immediately, is intense.

Consider the pressure daycares are under. Kim Hiscott is the executive director of Andrew Fleck Children's Services, which runs several different regulated child care operations in Ottawa, and she was by Hussen's side as he explained how the federal funding would flow on Friday.

She is one of the lucky ones. Her organization is getting by, and she wants to take government officials at their word that her organization will be made whole by the end of all this. She has had to hire extra staff to make sure emergency daycare services were safe during the initial stages of the pandemic. They're getting ready for a broader reopening next week, holding numerous meetings with parents, developing new safety protocols and making sure they have the space and equipment they need.

Many daycares operate on such thin margins that they can't shoulder the extra costs, but the Andrew Fleck organization is large and had built up a cushion, Hiscott says.

But if schoolchildren don't go back to class full time, five days a week, she's not sure what will happen. If part-time schooling means child care operations need to take the overflow, she does not know exactly how to prepare for those extra children.

"There are so many unknowns," Hiscott says. "What is that going to look like?...How do we support that?"

Childcare experts argue the child care sector needs between \$2 billion and \$2.5 billion just to deal with the urgent needs of the next few months — the extra workers, the extra space, the extra precautions, the sudden changes in policy and the need to cover losses from the last few months.

They also argue that every dollar into child care will flow back to society in terms of having a robust younger generation with parents who can work with the comfort of knowing their kids are well cared for.

There's no doubt that child care funding is a responsibility to be shared by provincial governments, municipal governments, corporations and parents. But there's an opportunity here for Justin Trudeau to really make a mark at a time when he could use it.

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