

# Province rapped over changes to child-care funding <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Manitoba's NDP has qualms with the provincial government's plan to slice funding and shuffle regulations for early childhood education — a series of proposed changes that could see parent costs for child care significantly increase in coming years.

Provincial NDP leader Wab Kinew was joined by parents, educators and media outside the Discovery Children's Centre in St. James Thursday to denounce "deep cuts" the province is considering within the child-care sector.

"Any parent, in particular working parents, can tell you what an impact the pandemic has had at home; trying to juggle working remotely while also keeping an eye on your kids and looking after their early-childhood education and development has been a huge challenge for many of our families, my own included," Kinew said during the press conference.

"Now is not the time to be cutting child care. Now is the time when any rational government that cares about the people of Manitoba should be making investments in strengthening child care and making sure early childhood education is strong."

The proposed set of regulatory changes in the child-care sector would see the Enhanced Nursery Grant — a chunk of funding dedicated to supporting operating costs at nearly 70 nursery schools — axed entirely, while deregulating fees for unlicensed daycare programs.

The changes could ultimately see the cost of early childhood education double or triple for Manitoba families still working to navigate the financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Laura Burla, executive director of the St. James Montessori School, represents one of more than 60 preschools on the funding chopping block. As it currently stands, the Enhanced Nursery Grant covers enough operating costs to allow schools like Burla's to charge parents just \$5 a day in fees, a figure Burla said would necessarily increase should the government eliminate the grant.

"Really what we need from the province is a little bit of rational thinking," Burla said during Thursday's press conference. "We need them to make investments in child care, not cuts, and at the end of the day any cuts to our child-care sector are not acceptable right now."

Burla added that enhanced nursery schools have not yet been given permission to open in the fall, leaving educators and parents uncertain about September plans.

"These parents are left wondering: 'Will I have child care, will I not have child care?'" Burla said.

"If they end up losing their spots, that's thousands of Manitobans who lose their child-care early years services. That affects their ability to go back to work, their ability to go to school, every aspect of their life."

The NDP are asking the provincial government to "back off" and abandon regulatory changes, and to better spend funds allocated to child care at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Start putting that money to work by investing in making parent fees cheaper, allowing protective equipment to be purchased by those who work in the child-care sector, and to create more spaces for kids to be educated," Kinew said.

Burla recently started a petition asking the Minister of Families, Heather Stefanson, to reconsider the funding cuts. As of Thursday the petition had garnered more than 4,500 signatures.

An email statement from the families minister said the regulatory changes are being considered to eliminate a two-tiered nursery school system in the province. Of Manitoba's approximately 162 nursery schools, 66 receive enhanced funding of \$4,180 per student per year, while 96 receive the regular funding of up to \$528 per year, creating differences in parent fees without significant differences in services, Stefanson wrote.

"There are no immediate plans to alter the enhanced nursery school operating grants or parent fees charged by nursery schools receiving these grants," Stefanson's statement said.

"The regulation can be passed without impacting the administration of the program, and once passed these regulations will simply provide our government with the legal foundation to make necessary changes to improve the nursery school system for families. Once a new

model is determined, centres will be given significant advance notice."

The province has given parents until Aug. 12 to submit feedback on the proposed changes through the Manitoba Regulatory Consultation portal. Changes could come into effect as soon as Sept. 1.

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