

Childcare needs to be reimagined, not just reopened ^[1]

Costs of operating safely will rise as demand remains low, putting childcare providers' futures at risk

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EXCERPTS

This is a pivotal moment for early learning and childcare in Canada. The transition from pandemic to reopening has been a massive challenge, leaving many providers in the sector with unanswered questions and deepening concerns about their long-term viability. For parents, the situation is equally dire, with urban and rural families alike having spent a long six months balancing work and childcare.

What a shame it would be if all of this struggle and sacrifice resulted in a return to the meagre status quo.

As has been extensively said and written over the past few months, this pandemic is a new type of economic challenge that requires more and better childcare. For a moment, it seemed we were close to finally acknowledging what the sector has known all along: childcare is central to an inclusive, productive economy and critical for early learning and development. But there's a lot of work ahead if we want to make anything of this moment, and so far, it's mostly parents who have been left to manage the additional duties.

Reality on the ground

Multi-site organizations that deliver a continuum of services across communities and age groups, including family support programs, have been significantly disrupted. The looming uncertainty creates barriers to business continuity and the consistency of care, largely due to the high degree of unpredictability around supply, demand and funding. The sector's long-standing capacity and access crisis has pivoted suddenly to a demand crisis as families re-evaluate their confidence in the system with respect to health and safety.

Many providers have reopened since the mandated closure, yet can't fill their spaces. In some cases, centres are fully operating for two or three children. The numbers simply don't add up. Centres immediately facing outbreaks of the virus will further shake confidence and disrupt business continuity. Managing the potential risk will be critical to building trust with families.

Relationships critical to operators' business continuity are also being tested as all parties manage competing pressures and priorities. Multi-site organizations depend on relationships with the province, municipalities and school boards, and of course, families. Managing these relationships, particularly as different school boards and municipalities work through reopening, requires extremely high levels of communication, responsiveness and alignment that were never built into the old system or into recent recovery plans.

Today, reopening centres requires additional resources and funding. Programs must meet specific and evolving ministry and public health requirements. With educators, screeners and rigorous cleaning to ensure infection control, costs of delivering care will rise as demand remains low. The sector has long been asked to do more with less, but a comprehensive approach is desperately needed to save existing spaces and ensure that a path toward viability exists for providers, especially non-profits. Regardless of what school looks like in the fall, children will still need care, and providers will do everything in their power to be there for families. But they need some help.

New normal, new model

Access, safety and capacity are all linked to reducing the financial burden on families and ensuring women can get back to work. Without further investment, operators will have little choice but to increase fees, and disparities in childcare access and economic inclusion will worsen. It's also very possible that parents will lose spaces entirely as providers shut down, unable to contend with new safety measures, weakened demand and reduced revenue. Women's participation in the labour force is already at its lowest level in three decades; widespread childcare closures will sustain these historic losses. The choice ahead is clear: We can either hit reset on reopening now, or wait until providers have closed and thousands of childcare spaces – which were already in short supply – are lost.

In either case, parents will continue to be negatively affected unless long-standing issues with the system are resolved. If the emergency framing helps instigate change, then that's a win for the sector and for families, but whatever comes next must acknowledge that the system isn't newly broken. The system and the families it serves – and the families it doesn't – have been struggling for a long time.

The existing system relies on a patchwork of funding – general operating dollars, fee subsidies, provincial wage subsidies for staff salaries, and more – with specific parameters and eligibility requirements. No universal access means revenues fluctuate depending on enrolment, and other funding mechanisms are not responsive to revenue pressures. Providers must compete to offer competitive compensation and

benefits to recruit and retain qualified staff. Unionized agencies must also meet financial commitments for wages and benefits in a collective agreement. All this to say, ensuring viability has long been a full-time challenge for providers that takes critical resources away from educators and children. We should use this moment to aim higher. Our children deserve more than viable.

A new model is about more than just keeping the doors open. Understanding how we support relationships with and between children, what the impact of physical distancing will be on interactions within care, and how trauma may present itself in centres and at home is just as important as keeping the sector afloat.

Better understanding these emerging issues means looking at early childhood education with a different lens, measuring some of its most pressing gaps, and using the unique vantage point of the sector to study families and communities. Equipping the sector with resources to gather data and direct research will result in stronger relationships with families, higher quality care and, hopefully, better informed public policy. This work will be essential in developing a more accessible model.

The discourse has shifted in the past weeks to calls for a national childcare plan. This shift is welcome but hopefully the beginning of a more nuanced conversation ahead. Current existential challenges will not pause for the development of a national approach. If we are determined to build toward a new normal, federal and provincial partners have to acknowledge the economic and social benefits of having more kids in care, and get real about the funding needed to support a more accessible model.

Safety first

There is no childcare without first developing a clear, transparent and sustainable public health plan for the sector, especially because a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is possible. Reopening requires ongoing training and updating of policies and guidelines to ensure compliance. What will be the new cost of providing care that complies with public health? Where will this money come from? In a fluctuating environment, unless a base-funded plan is put forth, any funding must remain flexible so providers can adapt in real time and ensure safety.

Parents and families trust the sector to provide a safe place for their children, and sustaining that trust in this moment requires transparency and evidence-based protocols. As long as parents have to choose between an unsustainable workload at home or an unsafe childcare space, the economy and the sector will suffer. The urgency around the safety of care needs to increase dramatically.

A sector in need of support

What does COVID-19 mean for women as caregivers, economically and socially? It largely depends on how much the sector is valued as part of reopening the economy. When so many childcare workers are women – often also taking on the caregiving at home – the impact on women and families has been tremendous. Many educators have been working on the front lines in emergency childcare, while others have been innovating in place, transitioning online to offer programs virtually to support families throughout this crisis.

We must look at the impact of the pandemic on mental health, and the stress on caregivers and educators across the continuum of services, including family support programs and licensed home childcare. The short-term impacts are already here and supports will need to evolve along with economic and public health realities.

Support must also come in the form of fair pay. Even as childcare was deemed essential, educators working in emergency childcare in several provinces were not eligible to receive “pandemic pay.” Then the sector was hit with a reopening plan lacking key details. If providers can’t support their existing staff, who are largely underpaid and undervalued already, having them work through a complex reopening process, and possible second wave of illness, will be remarkably difficult.

The sector was already facing a serious recruitment and retention issue, and depending on safety measures in place and the viability of the sector, hiring, training and keeping staff may only get harder. Early childhood educators have a professional designation, which comes with the costs, expectations and accountability of belonging to a professional college. A lack of decent wages for workers is a major obstacle to ensuring continuity, wellbeing and quality care.

What to do first

Any funding related to emergency measures or additional cleaning duties is great, but isn’t a systemic fix. Sustainable funding approaches have been advocated for elsewhere, but whatever approach is chosen, it must come with a collaborative approach to a sustained reopening.

To solve old problems and be nimble enough to take on new ones, the sector needs to be equipped to confront the physical, mental and financial costs of a rebuild. With childcare emerging as a critical issue for everyone from providers to policy-makers to chambers of commerce, that urgency and system-building potential needs to be captured. Making formal room for informed voices is a big part of that work, and will be critical to recovery planning.

We’ve seen a proposal for including informed voices in policy decisions from People for Education, which called for the Ontario government to establish a task force focused on the reopening of schools. Much like childcare centres, schools are educational spaces that need to balance public health measures and safety with education and development. Provinces and territories should immediately establish task forces focused on the reopening of childcare with an initial focus on the need to balance public health measures and safety with education and development, and a longer-term focus on system-building, resilience and viability. Should task forces on childcares and schools coexist, they should share some of the same members and government decision-makers in order to promote communication and an integrated approach to reopening the continuum of education.

Dialogue among childcare providers, between childcare providers and K-12 systems, and between providers and government will improve responsiveness to changes in demand for care and mitigate the impact of a potential second wave. New voices from the business community and elsewhere that reflect the renewed understanding of childcare's economic importance should also be included. These groups should continue well into 2021. Coordination and sharing of ideas will be especially useful if the federal government takes on a more active role in the childcare space, and will be absolutely critical if it does not.

The non-profit sector and the families who rely on it need clarity from governments on how addressing the sector's challenges will be factored into recovery. The transition from economic crisis to stabilization to renewal will be difficult for all levels of government, but without a practical, sustainable plan for childcare, it may be impossible.

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