

'This is a start' — advocates welcome Trudeau's commitment to build national child-care system ^[1]

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Child-care advocates welcomed the federal government's commitment to build a national child-care system, and they're hopeful Wednesday's throne speech marks the beginning of a path toward achieving affordable child care across the country.

"This is a start," said Morna Ballantyne, executive director of Child Care Now, an advocacy organization based in Ottawa.

"It's going to take a while to realize universal child care in Canada that is high-quality and fully inclusive of all children — including children with disabilities — but this is the signal that we were looking for in the throne speech."

Framing child care as crucial to economic recovery, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's speech — read by Gov. Gen. Julie Payette — said it has been nearly 50 years since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women found that child care was essential for women's social and economic equality, and they cannot allow the COVID-19 pandemic to "roll back the clock" on women's participation in the workforce.

"We have long understood that Canada cannot succeed if half of the population is held back," Payette said, reading from the speech.

"Canadians need more accessible, affordable, inclusive and high-quality child care."

Payette said the government will make a "significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early learning and child-care system." She added that the government will build on previous investments, learn from the model that exists in Quebec and work with all provinces and territories "to ensure that high-quality care is accessible to all."

The phrase "accessible to all" is what caught Martha Friendly's ear. "That's key," she said.

Friendly, the founder and executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, has been advocating for a publicly funded universal child-care system for more than 40 years, and although governments have made unfulfilled promises on child care before, she said she could not remember a commitment as strong as what was delivered Wednesday.

"I'm optimistic," Friendly said. "There's a great deal of work to be done, but it's work in a situation where there seems to be the will to move it forward, and I think that's really important."

The minority Liberals will need the support of at least one other major party to avoid an election.

Although details of the actual investment won't come until the budget, advocates were heartened by the government's apparent commitment to shift child care away from a market-based system that relies on parent fees.

"I think what they're committing to is real transformative change in how child care is organized in Canada," Ballantyne said.

Leah Gazan, a New Democrat MP and the party's critic for the Ministry of Families, Children and Social Development, said she supports a national child-care system but she wants to see the budget before she applauds Trudeau. "They've promised many things in the past and haven't delivered, so I'm not holding my breath," she said.

Gazan, who said she is a former child-care worker herself, criticized the speech for not addressing the issue of low wages for child-care workers — a concern long raised by advocates and early childhood educators as a major obstacle to staff recruitment and retention.

Ballantyne said increasing wages in the child-care sector is critical to expanding access and improving quality.

"As long as the wages remain as low as they are, it's going to be extremely difficult to recruit the workforce, to make sure the workforce is adequately trained and also to retain those who are trained and recruited into the sector."

When the budget comes, Ballantyne said she will be looking for a "big enough" investment over several years, starting with at least \$2 billion in the next fiscal year to start the work of building the system, followed by \$4 billion in the second year and \$6 billion in the third year.

She said there also needs to be accountability for funds transferred to the provinces by way of measurable goals and timelines related to affordability, accessibility and quality.

“It’s really important when you build a system that the money is spent well and progress is really closely monitored so adjustments can be made over time.”

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