

Canadians have been promised a national child-care program before. Will this time be any different? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Daycare was hands-down the big winner from this week's throne speech, and that's a victory for parents, kids, pandemic-stricken workplaces and the labour force of the future.

The persuading has been done. Now the hard work begins.

The Liberals have committed to a "significant, long-term sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early-learning and child-care system."

Vague, ambitious words, but the minister whose job it is to turn the rhetoric into reality already has some solid ideas on how to make it happen.

Ahmed Hussen says Ottawa is ready to pour money and political heft into a national child-care system by training up educators and creating more daycare spots now and in the coming years.

But tax incentives or handing out more money to families to pay for child care? That's not on, according to Hussen, setting himself up instead for many years of policy-making and some tough negotiations with the provinces to deliver on a longtime Liberal ambition.

"It doesn't address the issue of quality," Hussen said in an interview with the Star. "When you give people money and say, 'Go look for child care,' you compromise quality."

Giving people money for child care — either directly, or through tax deductions — has the benefit of being immediate and hands-off.

But Canada's experience with those types of incentives hasn't always helped low-income families access high-quality spots, with the tax measures inadvertently favouring higher-income earners.

Hussen has been consulting heavily for a few months now, and looking hard at the experience of Quebec and research done by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. He has picked a lane. Instead of tax incentives or benefits, he would rather the federal government be directly involved.

He wants to see the federal government set national standards for daycare, complete with proper enforcement mechanisms. He wants more and better data on what works and what doesn't. He wants to significantly bolster training and support for early childhood educators — a point he mentioned several times in the interview. He wants to boost the infrastructure that allows the educators and the kids to get together in a nurturing environment.

"There is a need for national leadership," he said.

The first stage, he says, is already underway: saving daycares from closure during the pandemic.

Many are barely surviving after having shut down for months and now facing surges in demand as people head back to work, as well as stiff requirements for extra space and lots of personal protective equipment.

In response, the federal government has rushed out previously budgeted child-care funding to the provinces and made it clear that it will be flexible on how it's used. Ottawa has also included \$625 million in emergency funding for provinces to spend on child care over the next six months, making for about \$1 billion available right now, Hussen said.

Still, child-care advocates, experts and economists have urged Ottawa to do much more and over the longer term. They argue that daycare funding pays for itself in increased economic activity, healthier children and a more permanent standing for women in the workplace. There's no more efficient way for the federal government to ease the strain that middle- and lower-income families feel in making ends meet than to expand affordable daycare.

Hussen agrees wholeheartedly, pointing to analysis that shows more women join the workforce when good daycare is readily available,

and women who work part time are able to take on more hours. That's been especially true in Quebec. "We want to emulate that, of course," he said.

And so the next stage is to redesign the federal involvement in early childhood education and ramp up its involvement — starting with a down-payment in the mini-budget expected this fall "to demonstrate early momentum."

From there, he'll buckle down to talk to the provinces, again, to implement a cost-sharing plan complete with enforced federal standards and a firm plan to funnel the federal money toward educators and daycare spots.

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