

A national childcare system is crucial for recovery and rebuilding

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Source: The Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 28 Sep 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online [2]

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The pandemic has made it painfully clear that child care is key to Canada's capacity to recover and rebuild. CEOs, union leaders, business groups and others have joined parents and families in recognizing that the lack of a real child-care system is dragging Canada down. Acknowledging this, the recent speech from the throne laid out the federal government's objective to "make a significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early learning and child-care system."

When COVID-19 hit, women were the first called (or pushed) out of the labour market, making this Canada's first care- and service-sector led recession — what some call a "pink-collar recession" or "she-cession." As provinces and territories emerged from lockdown, new child-care challenges compounded pre-existing ones, threatening to hobble economic restart and entrench gender-regressive economic outcomes.

Federal leadership is urgently required to stabilize child care and build toward a system that stimulates and sustains economic recovery. Decisions that governments make now will be era-defining, and have generational effects. The wrong decisions — or indecision — will slow economic and social recovery, and lead to a more unfair Canada. Tax credits or cash payments may seem a simple and expedient approach, but parents can't buy what doesn't exist; child-care services are collapsing all across Canada.

Without a plan for both immediate support and long-term system building, women will be the first out and last back to work. This will impact thousands of households and lead to stunted economic growth, decreased tax revenues for governments, and increased poverty for women and children. Canadian women's labour market participation has already reached 30-year lows during the pandemic, threatening to reverse a generation of gains.

Addressing uneven child-care accessibility, affordability and quality will stimulate typically men's employment in physical infrastructure spending (such as in building new centres) and women's employment in social infrastructure spending (employment in the child-care sector as well as women's ability to rejoin the labour market). Building a child-care system will protect Canada's economy against the care vulnerabilities revealed by the pandemic.

Canada has lacked a comprehensive vision and action plan with regard to child-care system building. And now the situation is worse: overall child-care capacity has been significantly reduced. In Ontario, for example, estimates are that about 400 centres currently remain closed, and current estimates have child-care spaces operating at about 35 per cent capacity. In Alberta, about 17 per cent remain closed, and recent estimates are that about 50,000 children have enrolled in daycares, out-of-school care and preschools; pre-COVID this number was roughly 110,000.

One advantage of Canada's decentralized social policy federation has been its experimentation at provincial levels to find best practices that can be emulated and scaled. But until that scaling happens, there are stark variations across the country. Over the past three decades, Quebec has focused on family policy, including building affordable, publicly managed child care, while other provinces have vacillated between some investments in expanding child-care affordability and the deployment of non-system building tax credits to families. The result has yielded a stark difference in women's labour force participation and other areas such as decreased household poverty.

Building a national child-care system requires establishing a federal Child-care Secretariat to aggressively plan and build physical stock and capacity in the child-care labour market, and in balancing accessibility, affordability and quality. It will also take serious financial commitment, starting with an increased federal investment of \$2 billion the first year, and \$2 billion added each year, reaching an annual expenditure of about \$10 billion. Add crucial intergovernmental co-operation, and the prospect of bringing to reality the visionary words of a throne speech that matched the consensus opinion of parents and many others becomes unstoppable

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