

On the record: Advocates rate NDP's child-care performance ^[1]

There's still a long way to go to achieving the promised \$10-a-day care, but government gets good marks.

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EXCERPTS

Sharon Gregson has been accused of partisan support for the NDP because of her comments on child care early in the election campaign.

She's covered education, youth and housing issues for a decade now, and we're lucky to have her.

But Gregson, spokesperson for the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC, a non-partisan organization advocating for the \$10 a Day Child Care Plan, says she's just stating facts. The NDP government invested more in child-care spaces, costs and wages in the last 3.5 years than the previous BC Liberal government did, she said.

"We have seen progress on all three fronts, which are affordability for families, new space creation and improved wages for educators," said Gregson. "They stabilized and/or improved on each of those."

Since forming government, the NDP has spent \$2 billion on child care, the largest investment in B.C. history, according to the Early Childhood Educators of BC.

The money provided capital funding for over 24,500 new licensed child-care spaces for infants to 12-year-olds; expanded Aboriginal Head Start programs in both Indigenous communities and urban areas; funded a \$2-an-hour wage top up for educators; enrolled 53,000 families in an income benefit program for child care, which saw 32,700 of those families paying less than \$10 a day for care; and subsidized child-care fees for another 63,000 families by \$350 per month.

"That is an improvement from when the BC Liberals were in power and fees were rising at more than the rate of inflation," Gregson said. The government is three years into its 10-year plan to provide universal \$10-a-day care, which the NDP pledged to implement during the 2017 campaign.

Under the BC Liberal government, the focus was on child-care subsidies for parents, which were capped at \$550 a month — an amount that had not changed since 2005.

Under the NDP, subsidies can go as high as \$1,250 per month.

In 2016/17, the last year the Liberals were in power, subsidies were provided for 32,000 families, Gregson notes.

But there's plenty of room for improvement and even to criticize the NDP's handling of child care, advocates say.

For example, Gregson notes capital funding has gone not only to public child-care providers but also to private for-profit centres and to not-for-profit organizations. The coalition wants public money to fund public child-care spaces.

"If I'm a private, for-profit operator and I get a grant for \$250,000, I can use that as a down payment on a piece of property. And then once my operating agreement is over, I own that asset and I can sell it and make a profit from that," she said.

"Whereas if it's a public asset like a school, even if the principal retires, the school continues operating and remains as a school for the next principal to come along and operate."

The NDP election platform does promise more public child-care spaces operated by schools, Crown corporations, local governments, First Nations and post-secondary institutions.

But the party also promises to support more private sector developers in including child-care spaces in new office and residential buildings.

Emily Gawlick, executive director of the Early Childhood Educators of BC, said the \$2-per-hour wage top up for the province's early childhood educators is a great start in improving pay and an indication that the NDP take child care seriously.

The median starting wage for an early childhood educator in the province is \$18 an hour, although some educators start at the \$14.60 minimum wage.

But Gregson and Gawlick want the next government to implement a wage grid developed in collaboration between their two organizations. The starting wage should be \$26 an hour as part of an effort to attract and retain staff, Gawlick said.

“Even as government is building spaces, it’s hard for employers to find the necessary qualified people to work in those programs,” she said. Child-care centres are already struggling to find staff, and expansion in the sector will add to the problem.

Gawlick would like to see scholarships for people training to be early childhood educators and professional development opportunities for people already working in the sector.

The NDP government did increase the number of spaces in childhood educator programs, Gawlick said. She added the programs should be expanded to include on-the-job training with mentors as well as classroom instruction.

Gregson and Gawlick also want to see the \$10-a-day prototype sites, which opened in 2018 with 1,800 spots, expanded provincewide.

The NDP government has dedicated \$30 million to culturally-appropriate Indigenous child-care spaces in the province since 2018. This helped fund 10 new Aboriginal Head Start centres, with 259 spaces for Indigenous children, while another two centres are funded but not yet open.

Karen Isaac of the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society says there are still communities without access to culturally-appropriate care, as well as barriers to opening new centres like access to training for Indigenous early childhood educators, licensing requirements, need for more funding and a lack of culturally-appropriate standards and regulations.

But Isaac says she wants the NDP to form government again, because it brought the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into provincial law.

“Now that there is a process to begin to look at all these facets of Indigenous life, including early learning and child care, we think that a lot of the systemic barriers that exist could be addressed by governments and First Nations working together to recognize jurisdiction,” Isaac said.

“But not only that: provide the capacity for First Nations to exercise authority [and] decision-making in this area, so that we are providing services that communities want and need at the community. And that could be child care, but it could be other things as well.”

Government child-care policy is “one size fits all,” Isaac added, and it does not recognize the rights of Indigenous people.

“For us as an organization, getting to that place of true dialogue and addressing some of these really systemic, historic issues, is really important. And it comes from a rights-based framework,” she said. “So it’s much larger than government initiatives.”

While the NDP platform does not mention UNDRIP in its child-care promises, it does pledge long-term agreements for Indigenous self-determination and establishing a secretariat to ensure any new legislation or policies are consistent with UNDRIP.

On Friday the BC Liberals called the NDP’s pledge to achieve \$10-a-day child care “fake” and said the government has fallen far short of its 2017 campaign promises.

Leader Andrew Wilkinson said his party would fund subsidies to ensure \$10-a-day child care for families making up to \$65,000. Families with an income of up to \$90,000 would get child care for \$20 per day and those earning up to \$125,000 per year would be eligible for child care for \$30 per day.*

The BC Green Party is also still putting its platform together. But in a press release Tuesday they outlined their child-care plan, pledging an additional \$223 million in annual funding by 2024/25 to provide more spaces, more training opportunities for early childhood educators, free child care for working parents with children under three, and up to 25 hours of free child care per week for three- and four-year-olds.

Gregson appreciates the child-care promises from the Greens, but says they haven’t pledged enough money to achieve the universal \$10 a day plan.

“I think it’s well-intentioned, but it’s not a very knowledgeable platform about child care, and it’s not costed appropriately,” she said.

Both the Greens and NDP pledge to move child care from the Ministry of Children and Family Development to the Education Ministry.

Gregson says the NDP has a more detailed plan for achieving universal \$10-a-day care than the Greens or the Liberals have released so far.

Region: British Columbia ^[3]

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