

NDP lays out childcare strategy, says initial steps could be rolled out now using dollars budgeted by UCP ^[1]

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Source: Edmonton Journal

Format: Article

Publication Date: 24 Oct 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

A new childcare plan could get 42,500 Albertans back to work in all sectors and add nearly \$6 billion to the province's GDP, says the NDP, calling on the UCP to better support childcare or risk economic recovery.

Initial proposals could start now to stabilize the sector and be paid for with \$120 million the UCP government has already budgeted for childcare in 2020-21, the NDP argues in its plan released Friday.

The province also needs a workforce strategy to address the sector's labour shortage by beefing up education for early childhood educators, supporting their professional development, and dealing with long-term challenges operators face in attracting and retaining the workforce, the NDP says.

If all its proposals were implemented the NDP estimates a return of \$4 for every \$1 invested, and calculates jobs and GDP growth based on an analysis of the Quebec model of universal childcare.

In a Friday interview, Notley called on the government to get to work on a comprehensive strategy as soon as possible with resources already budgeted.

"There are multiple problems. Without adequate government support, there is no market model for adequate levels of high quality, accessible, affordable care. There just isn't," said Notley.

The Edmonton Chamber of Commerce's latest report, released Wednesday, recommends expanding existing subsidies for childcare to cover more families and more options for flexible, 24-hour childcare.

President Janet Riopel said Friday the pandemic has laid bare the absolute vulnerability of some workers, and employers in every sector told the chamber childcare access is an issue.

"We've got to strengthen this childcare system so parents have a choice," she said, adding she is hopeful the provincial government will develop a plan to implement the chamber's recommendations.

Beginning in 2021, the NDP estimates scaling up universal \$25-a-day childcare will cost \$900 million per year, but economists have pointed out that such low-fee programs generate government revenue that can more than cover the additional system costs.

Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz said in an interview Friday the NDP's \$25-a-day childcare plan was recycled, would require tax increases, and its nearly billion-dollar price tag won't fit the province's budget.

After being forced to shut down due to public health orders beginning in March, childcare centres got three phases of restart funding from the province totalling \$17.8 million.

A separate \$45 million in ongoing funding from the federal government was announced in July along with a revamped subsidy model, and the federal government pitched in another \$71.8 million towards Alberta childcare in September under its Safe Restart Agreement – funding that will dry up in December.

The province has unspent childcare subsidies and wage top-ups withheld during the pandemic shutdown, but Schulz said the government did not yet know the final numbers.

"We think it's prudent to save some of those dollars, and make sure that if we are investing them, that they are going to the places where they're needed most – based on the input that we get from operators and parents," said Schulz. The system needs to remain flexible, and it's too early to guess what might happen before the end of the fiscal year, Schulz said.

Ninety-seven per cent of childcare centres have reopened because of government funding, but only 50 per cent of children have come back, Schulz said. It's unclear what is affecting enrolment numbers, and Schulz said the government continues to collect data.

But Notley said the UCP government's moves have hurt the fragile sector already, and its recovery plan fails to include women in any meaningful way.

This year, the UCP has ended the \$25-a-day Early Learning and Child Care Centre program, eliminated the accreditation process, and cut special grants to staff and operators.

The government is set to introduce legislation with new licensing regulation for operators this fall, and Notley said she was worried that would introduce a race to the bottom.

"We are very concerned that they are going to lower standards, lower accountability, lower transparency, tracking and lower enforcement," said Notley.

Region: Alberta ^[3]

Tags: funding ^[4]
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