

These kids won't magically catch up. UCP cuts eliminate years of progress on early education ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Pay now or pay a lot more later.

That's why the provincial cuts to early learning programs don't make sense. Children who can't speak clearly, hold a pencil or follow instructions when they enter kindergarten aren't going to magically catch up.

You'll see a wave of behavioural problems from kids who can't express themselves, a pipeline to getting expelled and worse; or silent kids turning into quiet adults who can barely read and never reach their full potential. That's a huge cost. Society will pay later.

Last spring, the UCP announced it was shifting the dollars around for PUF, or program unit funding, a key grant for early learning programs targeted at getting children with a variety of delays ready for kindergarten.

That was February, just before the pandemic hit. The government said funding would remain the same, as would eligibility requirements.

But the fine print tells a different story. The per-child cap of up to \$25,000 stayed the same for a small group of children, specifically those who have severe medical disabilities and are able to attend a full-day program (800 program hours a year).

But if they attend a half-day program, as three-quarters of all funded children did, their grant was cut to \$15,000.

The cut was more dramatic for small children with language delays, severe or moderate, which previously made up 68 per cent of the children in the program. Their grant was also up to \$25,000, depending on need. Now children with severe language delays can access \$17,000 for a full-day program, and \$10,000 for a half-day program.

Children with moderate language delays can no longer access that money at all. Previously, a child was funded if they had a mix of moderate and severe delays in language and motor skills. Now the delay must be severe in language, or they fall under a different grant, which has minimum hour requirements that can't be accommodated in many programs.

Education Minister Adriana LaGrange was asked about this in question period Monday following our reporting. She again said, "Eligibility for PUF has not changed and the cap does remain at \$25,000."

It's gaslighting parents.

The per-student cuts and eligibility restrictions led the Edmonton public and Catholic boards to close 68 early learning sites across the city this past September leaving just 16 sites.

The UCP shifted some funding from early learning to K-12 specialized supports but it does not make up the difference. It's hard to track the damage province-wide but since Edmonton has seen hundreds of children stop getting these services, the number provincially must be thousands.

Monique Charest and Andrea MacLeod, professors in the University of Alberta's faculty of rehabilitative medicine, are getting ready to measure the impact.

They expect more behaviour problems from students not ready to learn reading and writing. Without help, students may learn to speak with full sentences but will always struggle to follow complex thought. And these are not rare problems. Best estimates are that one in 14 children have a development language disability. It's four times more common than autism. Alberta needs these children to thrive.

The last time Alberta measured, its young children were trailing national standards. From 2009 to 2014, Alberta Education ran the Early Childhood Development Mapping Project (ECMap), getting schools to evaluate 87,724 kindergarten students across the province.

Results varied widely by community, but overall 29 per cent of children were having "great difficulty" in at least one of five areas of development, including being able to speak clearly, understand instruction, cope emotionally and interact socially with their peers.

That compared to 25 per cent of children nationally. Only 46 per cent of children in Alberta were considered developmentally appropriate in all five areas.

The Progressive Conservative government of the day set up community coalitions across the province to boost attendance and catch at-risk children. It increased eligibility for funding and school boards set up targeted intervention in community centres.

The community coalitions asked for a repeat analysis to look for progress, said Gloria Chalmers, a former community co-chairwoman in Edmonton's southeast. Instead, the UCP disbanded the coalitions in March.

It's easy to think childcare is a private issue, one each parent should figure out on their own. But the preschoolers of today are the workforce of tomorrow.

Invest in them — figure out what milestones they missed and help them catch up — and it's likely they'll do well in kindergarten, graduate from school, and stand strong on their own two feet. If not, this will return to haunt us later.

Region: Alberta [3]

Tags: funding [4]

investment [5]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/investment>