

On the cusp of a national child-care strategy ^[1]

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Source: The Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 14 Nov 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Trudeau's federal government made a big promise in September's throne speech: the creation of a national child-care strategy, a response to the fact that women have been harder-hit than men by job loss due to COVID-19.

Advocates have been calling for an accessible system dating back to 1970, when the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommended a national child-care policy. More than 20 years later, a federal task force recommended the same. In 2004, Paul Martin's Liberals promised \$1 billion a year to build a national child-care system. However, Canada has yet to see the creation of a national child-care program.

But this time, advocates believe it could actually happen, buoyed by the government promise of not just one-time funding but sustained funding for the future. In the speech, the government promised to "build on previous investments, learn from the model that already exists in Quebec, and work with all provinces and territories to ensure that high-quality care is accessible to all."

Carolyn Ferns, policy co-ordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, said the government seems to be listening to experts and advocates.

"The throne speech promise was more than just a sort of throwaway line. It had several things in it which were things that child-care advocates have been looking for and asking for," she said.

Importantly, it's not only child-care advocates who have been asking — the call for affordable child care has been echoed by other groups such as the Chamber of Commerce and numerous banks, after the pandemic made it clear that not fixing this problem would have widespread economic implications, said Ferns.

But Katherine Scott, senior researcher with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, is slightly less hopeful.

"I'm cautiously optimistic that new investment in child care is coming. I'm less optimistic that it will result in what's absolutely needed ... a pan-Canadian system that provides child care for all," she said. "That would require creative and sustained collaboration with the provinces and territories to direct monies into the creation of services in different communities tailored to the needs of children in those communities."

After all, creating child care for all is a big — and expensive — task.

Ferns wants to see a national secretariat tasked with leading the charge.

"If we're really serious about taking it on, we need to build up the policy capacity in the federal bureaucracy to be able to actually make this happen. Because it's not going to happen by magic."

Alana Powell, executive co-ordinator for the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, said building a national program from the ground up will have a much bigger impact than offering Band-Aid solutions, as previous federal and provincial governments have often done.

Armine Yalnizyan, an economist and the Atkinson Fellow on the Future of Workers, said it's important the federal government steps up with significant spending that isn't contingent on how much the provinces and territories chip in, but rather contingent on quality: adding trained early childhood educators with better compensation, and adding capacity so that parents are guaranteed at least six hours of child care a day.

With Canada's population aging out of the workforce, Yalnizyan said accessible and high-quality child care will be key to keeping younger Canadians working.

"That is a very different thing than just pouring money and stirring into the status quo."

Child care, and the care sector overall, has issues retaining its workers, said Ferns, due to low compensation and the precariousness of a lot of care work, which is primarily done by women, often women of colour.

That's why Ferns wants to see a national strategy focused not just on consistent training of child-care workers, but also on how those workers are compensated and treated.

With higher wages, the child-care sector could see its workers stay for longer, said Powell, heightening the quality of child-care services.

"Our hope is ... that we're able to have quality early learning and child care provided by well compensated and supported early childhood educators," she said. "Or else we're building a system without its foundation."

Learning from Quebec

Thanks to Quebec, which introduced its subsidized child-care system in 1997, there is real statistical evidence that accessible child care improves women's participation in the workforce, said Ferns.

A 2018 report from Statistics Canada comparing labour force participation and other markers between Ontario and Quebec found that despite higher fertility rates in Quebec, female labour force participation increased at a faster pace there than in Ontario — especially among women with young children.

"These findings suggest that Quebec's family policies made it economically beneficial for women with lower levels of educational attainment — who tend to earn lower wages — to join and remain in the workforce," the study concludes.

The study also found that the direct funding of child care by the government, instead of reducing costs through tax credits as was the case before 1997, made Quebec's child-care program more accessible to low-income families.

"The 1997 family policy in Quebec was a game changer for that province," said Scott — for the economy, for women's participation in the economy, for child poverty and more.

But not everything about Quebec's system should be applied nationally, experts say.

Upon promising universal child care, Quebec had to build its system quickly due to demand, said Ferns. As a result, the province relied too much on the expansion of for-profit services, which research later showed provided lower-quality child care than the public providers.

However, Quebec got it right on affordability, said Ferns: it started at \$5 per day when the program first began more than two decades ago, then moved up to \$7. It then became a sliding scale dependent on family income, before recently returning to a flat rate of \$8.35.

This system is much better than what other provinces have in place, said Ferns. While there are subsidies available, they don't cover everyone, and there are often long wait-lists to receive them. She believes child-care providers should be funded directly and required to set affordable fees instead.

The current system in most provinces doesn't address the fundamental issues with child care — consistency and access — said Scott. It's also more vulnerable to political changes than a national system would be, she added.

"We have a market-based system for what is effectively an essential service."

Public vs. private

It's important to avoid "turning child care into a version of long-term care," said Yalnizyan. Public oversight of both public and for-profit child care providers is required. Where possible, integrating the child-care providers into public school systems could help manage oversight and reduce costs, she said.

Ferns wants to see a public child-care system where provinces and child-care providers are held accountable to the money they receive. That doesn't mean getting rid of existing private providers, she added, which could be grandfathered in.

Powell, too, believes the system should be publicly managed. Under the current patchwork of services, many smaller communities are underserved, she said. And although the available subsidies help some low-income families pay for child care, they don't create more spaces or rural access.

Even better, child-care services should be integrated as much as possible into other services, said Scott. She uses Norway as an example, where child care is "tightly integrated" with education, family leave and parental benefits.

"This kind of social infrastructure becomes the platform to tackle any number of things."

Correction - Nov. 16, 2020: This article was edited from a previous version to include that Quebec's subsidized public child-care system returned to a flat rate of \$8.25 per day in November 2019 after being on a sliding scale dependent on family income.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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