

It's time to move ahead on a national child-care system ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

After much talk and some long-awaited cash during its first mandate, Justin Trudeau's Liberal government says it is getting serious about child care.

In her fall economic statement, Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland announced Ottawa's plan to launch a national child-care system based on lessons learned in Quebec, where a generation of parents has enjoyed almost universal access and the lowest fees in the country at \$8.50 a day.

Compare that to Toronto, where spaces are so scarce many parents are forced to put their names on wait lists before their children are born to secure a spot -- and then pay more than \$80 a day for it.

To say Freeland is on the hot seat as she prepares her 2021 federal budget is an understatement.

Parents and the provinces, which are responsible for overseeing child care, will be looking for a substantial financial commitment to build and sustain a service that was first flagged by a federal royal commission as a prerequisite for women's equality half a century ago.

As a fiscal benchmark, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), representing the world's most advanced nations, recommends countries spend at least 1 per cent of GDP on early learning and child care. Ottawa and the provinces spend barely half that amount, leaving parents in this country paying among the highest child-care fees in the OECD.

No one expects Freeland to ramp up federal child-care funding overnight to meet the OECD recommendation. But she needs to commit to that benchmark and set a reasonable timetable to meet it.

To build the affordable, accessible, inclusive and high-quality child-care system Canada needs, Freeland will also have to be clear that all new federal funding must be spent by provinces on programs. Parents can't use a tax credit or fee voucher on a service that does not exist.

Disappointingly, Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole showed no interest in a national child-care system when asked about it in a recent meeting with the Star's editorial board. He, like Ontario Premier Doug Ford, favours tax deductions, rebates or credits claiming that provides parents with options.

It's troublingly reminiscent of the billions of dollars spent by Stephen Harper's Conservative government on the old universal child care benefit that resulted in zero new child-care spaces.

A key strength of the transformative \$5-a-day child care adopted by Quebec in the mid-1990s was direct funding to provincially-regulated non-profit centres. That financial support allowed programs to cap parent fees and boost staff pay. Unionization, and more recently, provincial wage scales, also helped to increase wages and benefits, improve working conditions, and ensure a steady supply of trained professionals in the sector.

But sufficient and sustained funding for child-care services is crucial, as Quebec learned in the mid-2000s when former premier Jean Charest introduced tax credits for parents as a cost-cutting measure. The move limited expansion of the non-profit centres and sparked a rise in the number of for-profit child-care programs that tend to pay lower wages, charge higher parent fees and offer inferior quality care than programs funded directly by the province. Non-profits have had to raise fees to \$8.50 but parents with children in for-profit programs funded through tax credits pay upwards of \$20 a day.

The Quebec lesson is clear: new money for child care must support programs. That is the only way Ottawa will be able to lower parent fees and raise wages, which in turn, will attract and retain well-trained staff who are the foundation of high-quality child care. That should be the starting point as Ottawa negotiates bilateral funding agreements with provinces and territories.

While Ottawa turned its back on child care for a decade under the Harper government, other countries have moved forward with publicly-funded programs that work for parents, children and the economy. The Liberals' proposed national child-care secretariat should be gathering that knowledge, and policy makers in Ottawa and the provinces should be using it to create a new, publicly-managed system that ensures every Canadian family has access to the affordable, high quality care they need.

Making child care as convenient and accessible to parents as the public school system by funding new centres in neighbourhood schools, would be one model to follow. In cities where businesses are looking to downsize post-pandemic, municipalities and other public agencies could purchase under-used commercial space for centres.

Child care is complex. But the fundamentals are not complicated. Provinces that are ready to sign-on should get started immediately. But under no circumstances should Ottawa ink funding deals with provinces that don't embrace this new federal vision.

In addition to cutting child poverty and supporting child development, research on public child-care spending in Quebec shows the service pays for itself through the ripple effect of more women earning, spending and paying taxes. Even more impressive, every \$1 in public spending on child care produces \$3.25 in broader economic activity.

The economic imperative for a national child care system existed before the pandemic threw women out of work in greater numbers than men. A unique consensus among business, labour and civil society agrees there can be no recovery from the so-called "she-cession" without child care.

It is long past time for Ottawa to deliver.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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