

One-time payment to working parents not enough to help families struggling to cover costs: advocate ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A one-time provincial payment of \$561 per child to working parents with children in daycare or preschool is a “Band-Aid” on the much larger issue of inaccessible child care, an advocate for Alberta parents said Wednesday.

The provincial government on Wednesday announced a \$108-million benefit to supplement child care expenses during the pandemic. The Working Parents Benefit is aimed at families with an annual income of \$100,000 or less, and will open to applications from March 1 to 5.

The funds are intended to support parents who rely on daycare; however, Medeana Moussa, spokeswoman for advocacy group Support Our Students Alberta, said it won’t be enough for struggling families.

“This is a Band-Aid on the long-standing problem of affordable child care. This is a short-term approach, lacking a sustainable plan and vision for the future,” said Moussa.

The average monthly cost for full-time licensed daycare in the province is around \$900.

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“The lack of vision is problematic for working families, especially under the pandemic circumstances that has exacerbated so many inequities in our society. Access to affordable child care can be a game-changer for some families,” Moussa said.

Mike Holden, chief economist at Business Council of Alberta, said affordable child care is essential to the province’s workforce but efforts to improve accessibility are costly. The \$561-per-child payments offer temporary relief to low- and middle-income families, he said.

“I don’t think this is going to do anything to move the dial on future child care use or engagement in the labour force, but as a one-time COVID-19 support measure, I think it’s very welcome,” he said.

Tiffany-Joy Robertson, a working parent who accompanied Children’s Services Minister Rebecca Schulz during the government’s announcement, said she — like many other parents — has made tough choices this year to keep her children in quality daycare.

“It’s great to see the government recognize the pressures that working parents are facing. As a single mother who has felt the stresses of work and child care this past year, this money is greatly appreciated,” said Robertson.

Schulz said those eligible for the benefit must have paid for three months of child care between April 1 and Dec. 31, 2020, and be able to produce receipts. It will support up to 192,000 children who attended licensed or unlicensed daycare, day homes, out-of-school care or preschool.

“We want to directly support these parents by alleviating the financial pressures they have faced this past year,” she said.

The announcement comes the day before the United Conservative government releases this year’s budget.

Rakhi Pancholi, the NDP shadow minister for Children’s Services, said the payment might get parents through this month but will do nothing for the next.

“The economic imperative in this moment is to get Albertans back to work. No parent is going to be able to return to work or school based on half a month’s worth of child care fees,” said Pancholi.

She suggested investing instead in an accessible child care program such as the NDP’s \$25-per-day daycare system.

The UCP government ended funding for that program last summer. Schulz said it would have cost taxpayers about \$1 billion a year and said the majority of parents aren’t opting for licensed child care.

A grant of up to \$17.8 million was announced for child care centres and family day home agencies in May while the province worked to reopen safely amid the first wave of the pandemic.

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