

# Building a national child-care system requires a coherent, ambitious approach <sup>[1]</sup>

Universal, affordable and reliable child care must be part of the strategy if Canada is to re-cover. It cannot be piecemeal and it cannot be cheap.

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Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

There is growing consensus that post-pandemic recovery will be impossible without major public spending to make high-quality child care available and affordable for parents. The 2020 speech from the throne promised that Ottawa would be ambitious and “make a significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early-learning and child-care system,” drawing on lessons from Quebec, which began its universal child-care project more than 20 years ago.

The federal government has not yet specified what kind of system it intends to build, and how expansion will be accomplished, including how the federal government will navigate the tricky shoals of provincial/territorial/Indigenous relations to get the job done. Federal policy-makers would be well-served by starting with what is known to be fundamental to building a system the right way.

First, child-care provision cannot be sustained, let alone expanded, improved and made affordable unless governments directly fund the operation of services. As key components of public operational funding schemes, each province and territory needs a system of set or capped parent fees to ensure affordability, together with a provincially required educator wage grid or pay scale that ensures staff wages and compensation reflect the value of the work and make it possible for early-childhood educators to remain in the field.

Demand-side public funding schemes such as tax credits, cash benefits, parent fee subsidies or other individual parent vouchers have all contributed to Canada’s child-care turmoil. Conversely, substantial government operational funding – accompanied by public management of fees and wages – is the basis for the success of Quebec’s system of les centres de la petite enfance. There are also lessons which we can learn from the stable early-learning and child-care systems in countries like Norway, Sweden, France and Denmark.

Second, early-learning and child-care systems cannot be built successfully if governments don’t have a clear vision of the kind of system they want. The OECD advised Canada and other countries to adopt “a systemic and integrated approach to policy development” and said: “Implementation calls for a clear vision for children underlying early-childhood education and care policy, and co-ordinated policy frameworks at centralised and decentralised levels.” Federal dollars alone will not bring about the transformation needed, nor will the fits-and-starts approach of the last four decades.

It is equally clear that the current free-market approach cannot ensure an adequate supply of quality, affordable services. The federal government must be ambitious in its goal. A fully publicly and operationally funded (not necessarily free) and publicly managed system of early learning and child care that puts the onus on governments should be the outcome. It must ensure that services are available, affordable, high quality, maintained and part of Canada’s social infrastructure. The federal government must lead in building the system by using sound, evidence-based policy and by using its spending power to earn the co-operation of provinces and territories.

Third, incoherent piecemeal approaches to child-care policy do not work. The federal government must take a sustained, holistic approach to system-building, working on three interdependent and interlinked fronts. First, it must make early-learning and child-care services available to all by expanding and maintaining them. Second it should ensure child care is affordable for all families. Finally, it must improve quality, largely by addressing child-care workforce issues.

Third, incoherent piecemeal approaches to child-care policy do not work. The federal government must take a sustained, holistic approach to system-building, working on three interdependent and interlinked fronts. First, it must make early-learning and child-care services available to all by expanding and maintaining them. Second it should ensure child care is affordable for all families. Finally, it must improve quality, largely by addressing child-care workforce issues. Like the legs of a three-legged stool, each issue is crucial. Expanding early-learning and child-care spaces makes no sense if they’re not affordable. Quality services cannot expand without addressing workforce challenges. The huge problems of recruitment and retention (connected to the low wages and lack of benefits for staff) cannot be solved by raising already unaffordable parent fees. Finally, the unsatisfactory working conditions driving educators away cannot be addressed in isolation. They need a full workforce strategy.

Importantly for system-building, the three legs of the stool must be held together by a base of substantial, reliable, public operational funding. It is impossible to expand services, make them affordable for parents and raise quality by investing in the child-care workforce without this. Such funding is the missing piece in Canadian child care. Its absence is the reason UNICEF ranked Canada last (with Ireland) in its 2008 evaluation of early childhood services among 25 OECD countries.

The fourth thing we know about building early learning and child care is that expansion of child-care services will continue to be slow, sporadic and inequitably distributed if we continue to assume that developing them is primarily a private responsibility of parent groups, the voluntary sector or entrepreneurs. In the existing Canadian child-care market model, services are not intentionally planned and developed. Instead, whether, where and how child-care services develop depends mostly on whether private individuals or groups are available, willing and have the resources to initiate and manage the development process.

Building a universal child-care system requires an alternative model. This means public responsibility for planned and managed expansion strategies in every province and territory. This will ensure sufficient and equitably distributed publicly operated and non-for-profit services. Expansion must be supported by public capital funding and planning processes. These must be public and democratic. Additionally, new kinds of support must be provided for non-profit and public development, including expanded use of schools and other public buildings.

The final thing we know is this will take time, effort and political will. Canada must move beyond the time-worn starts-stops-reverses with each change in government. Countries with well-developed child-care systems such as Sweden, Denmark and France applied sustained effort over more than a decade to develop their universal child-care systems. Germany, a federation like Canada, continues to move forward with federal leadership.

Pragmatically, Canada's early-learning and child-care system-building cannot occur in a single year or two. Instead, system-building will depend on both the will and skill of the federal government, as well as the collaboration and interest of provincial and territorial governments on an ongoing basis. An ambitious early-learning and child-care system for all won't happen without it.

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** child care system <sup>[4]</sup>

funding <sup>[5]</sup>

workforce <sup>[6]</sup>

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