

Child care enrolment plunges amidst pandemic: report ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

MANITOBA child care advocates are urging the province to step up funding for non-profit centres, in the wake of a new report showing Winnipeg for-profit facilities charge more than 2.5 times the fees.

"The reality is that the child care system in Canada and in Manitoba is in a vulnerable state as a service, even though it's more urgently needed than ever," University of Manitoba sociology Prof. Susan Prentice said.

The report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, titled "Sounding the Alarm: COVID-19's impact on the child care sector," found enrolment dropped substantially in 2020. While non-profit child care centres logged an average 20 per cent drop in enrolment, for-profit facilities had lost an average of 27 per cent by the fall.

Molly McCracken, director of the CCPA's Manitoba office, said the larger drop in for-profit enrolment can be attributed to higher fees.

Manitoba, P.E.I., and Quebec are the only Canadian provinces with set child care fees, resulting in lower expenses for families as the government subsidizes operating budgets with provincial funding.

According to the report, Winnipeg had the second-lowest median monthly fee rates for infants, toddlers and pre-school children, at \$451/month for toddler and pre-school, and \$651/month for infants.

In the private sector, those fees rocketed to \$1,700/month for infants and \$933/month for pre-school-aged children — 2.6 times the set fee rate.

"What this report shows, by comparing across the country, is this model that Manitoba has is working in providing more affordable child care than other places," McCracken said Thursday.

Though 95 per cent of Manitoba child care centres are non-profit, advocates said recently introduced legislation has opened the possibility of public funding for private centres — which Prentice called a step backward.

"It strikes me as ludicrous that anyone could think you could provide more affordability by making more privatized child care," said Prentice.

"We need to be shifting and transforming a sector that used to primarily be considered a private service... to recognizing that it should be an essential piece of what should be public infrastructure in a modern economy."

McCracken noted accessible child care would be essential to allowing family members to re-enter a post-pandemic workforce.

"The value of stable funding... is then parents, even if they lose work for whatever reason, will be able to still keep their kids in daycare," she said.

"The way to keep child care affordable is to fund non-profit centres, and fund more of them."

Region: Manitoba ^[3]

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