

# There is one way to build a Canada-wide child-care system: Fund the services <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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

## EXCERPTS

Canada will eventually emerge from lockdowns and a health-induced economic downturn. The pandemic has revealed our strengths, frailties and resiliency, and changed us as a nation.

We have also reimagined our federation. Pandemic federalism has demonstrated our elected leaders' capacities to respond to shared risks and collaborate in Canada's interests. In this new moment, there is widespread agreement that a Canada-wide child-care system will accelerate the post-crisis economic recovery and make it fairer.

The throne speech last September made plain that the federal government is ready to fund what is required to build a system, and that the time to do so is now.

So, what's standing in the way on this urgent priority that sometimes comes close but is never delivered?

Two surmountable obstacles stall progress on child-care system building; negotiating federalism and complexity inertia.

Jurisdictional contests are a hallmark of Canada's decentralized federation and constitutional inheritance. Pandemic federalism has been a moment of reset for intergovernmental relations, with consensus on the need for equitable pan-Canadian support, stabilization and recovery.

If this is Canada's first "she-cession," child care is the social infrastructure investment that will meet the moment and avert a stunted, gender-regressive recovery. Simply, if women's labour market position does not recover, the economy can't rebound, and that immense risk doesn't respect borders. The old chestnut of "federalism is the problem" needs setting aside in service of a fair, even and robust economic return.

Moving toward recovery federalism builds on the current spirit of respect and reciprocity that acknowledges Ottawa, the provinces and territories as important and equal partners. Building a child-care system requires direct, reliable and sustained funding in the upcoming federal budget that builds on current provincial funding, to support and develop defined child-care services and programs.

It requires clarity, transparency and shared accountability on the policy actions that will achieve system building, as well as diplomacy and stewardship that can overcome barriers to implementation. A federally-led and funded child-care secretariat is key to collaboration and shared understanding among jurisdictions, as well as policy research and data.

Progress on child-care system development is also hampered by a kind of complexity paralysis or inertia. Childcare, like health or education, is complex in that it involves built infrastructure, human infrastructure that requires training and pay, governance and management. The many moving parts and scale are daunting and can frustrate policy ambition and action. But complexity does not mean difficulty or impossibility. Clarity on what system building includes and omits from the policy menu counters complexity inertia.

The approach that should be followed can be summarized in a three-word mantra: fund the services. Federal funding should be directly provided to provinces and territories only where the investment will grow and develop a quality child-care system. There are no shortcuts. System development does not include stimulating a low wage, female, precarious child care labour market via additional cash-for-care measures, tax credits, or vouchers.

Funding the services begins with fee caps, wages and system expansion.

**Fee cap (promoting affordability):** Provinces and territories will limit the amount that parents pay. Federal funds will be paid directly by them to services in regulated programs and centres to make up for the reduction in parent fees. Where they exist already, fee caps would continue and be improved with the additional federal support.

**Fund the workforce and wages (promoting quality):** Directly fund wages determined through grids that provide fair and consistent pay for the early childhood educator workforce, similar to the way teachers' wages are consistent and predictable. Develop and implement a

workforce strategy to address expansion recruitment, retention, and professional preparation and development. The actions of each province and territory may differ, but as long as the requirements above are met, models may differ, and flexibility allowed.

Expansion strategy (promoting accessibility): Invest in capital to build and retrofit publicly owned buildings for child-care centres. Public investments would create and retain publicly owned assets. Importantly, public management of the system means determining where services are needed, and purposefully undertaking their development and funding.

This spring, the federal budget needs at least these three elements: a minimum five-year, incremental, escalating to ongoing (\$8 billion to \$10 billion per year) funding commitment that provides long-term assurance to provinces and territories; a clear commitment to fund the services; and national stewardship in the form of the expert-led child-care secretariat to support and facilitate a fair and nationally even recovery, with lasting economic benefits.

That's how we can successfully get from where we are, and have been for far too long, to where we need to get to.

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

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

funding <sup>[5]</sup>

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