

Jodie Kehl on Bill 47, The Early Learning and Child Care Act ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Access interview online [38:10] ^[2]

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EXCERPTS

One of the numerous bills announced in the legislature this March is Bill 47, The Early Learning and Child Care Act. The Bill has raised questions for those working in the child care sector, and in order to get context and dissect some of the concerns being raised, we interviewed Jodie Kehl, Executive Director of the Manitoba Child Care Association (MCCA).

Over the years, Manitoba has developed a strong child care system, according to Kehl. She elaborates that our system has been well regulated and maintained. And currently, 95% of the organizations providing child care are non-profit. Kehl notes that studies have shown that there is a correlation between the non-profit sector and higher quality child care, so it is important to recognize the strengths of our current system in this regard. Kehl has questions about how Bill 47, which proposes to modernize child care in Manitoba, will affect the strong system already in place, namely how public funds will be allocated under the new Act, how child care work will be regulated, and whether current benefits for care workers will be safeguarded. Kehl and the MCCA are asking for a meeting with Minister Rochelle Squires in the days ahead in order to ask for clarification on some of the changes proposed in the Bill.

The mission of the MCCA is to “advocate for a quality system of child care [and to] advance early learning and child care education as a profession.” In our interview, Kehl further defined quality as it pertains to the child care sector by noting that studies have shown that “adequate funding [for child care operators and staff], small group sizes, high adult to child ratio, language rich development, knowledgeable and trained educators, developing appropriate curriculum, and a play based curriculum” all contribute to healthy, active children who will grow up to be healthy, active contributors to our communities.

“Intrinsically, early childhood educators know that the work they do is important. It’s valuable. It has outcomes on a number of levels, from an economic standpoint, but also for childhood development.”

Jodie Kehl, Executive Director of the MCCA

Kehl’s message—if we invest for the long-term in quality child care early, the benefits to our community will not only be immediately apparent as parents return to work, but also over the long term through lower poverty and crime rates.

Of course, Kehl understands that although ideally we provide the highest quality child care to all children in the province, in reality providing child care in our current economic climate is a balancing act. The child care system in Manitoba is like a stool that rests on three legs—quality, affordability, and accessibility. In order to create a more equitable economic climate, our child care system needs to be able to provide all three elements to all families. Parents in every economic situation need to be able to access and afford child care so they can work to support their family’s needs and contribute to our community, and children need quality child care to be able to succeed and contribute later in life. If we focus on one or two, and lose sight of the others, we fail to provide the support needed to ensure all members of our community are able to participate and contribute.

Thus the MCCA’s questions for Minister Squires about Bill 47 revolve around these three issues—affordability, quality, and accessibility:

- Currently child care in Manitoba is regulated for children up to age 12. The new Act references learning experiences for infants and preschoolers, but not for school-age children. Will child care continue to be considered a “learning experience” and regulated for school-aged children?
- Under the new Bill are public funds available to all programs regardless of auspice? At present, only not-for-profit programs are eligible for provincial operating grants, but if these programs obtain a grant they are limited as to what they can charge parents. For-profit programs are not eligible for operating grants, but can charge parents whatever they want. Will this change under the new act and will public funds go to private organizations?
- The new Act refers to employees who are certified while the previous act talked about classifications, qualifications, and quality. Currently two-thirds of staff need to be trained. Will this change? Will the classification and education required for Early Childhood

Educators change?

- The Bill mentions that financial assistance could be provided to a person who is not licensed. Again, does this mean that non-licensed and unregulated child care could be eligible for public funds? Could a privately hired nanny be eligible for public funds?
- Currently the government provides financial assistance through subsidized fees for low-income families. There is a note about financial assistance in the new Bill, but there are no details. What other types of assistance are they looking at for families in the new Bill. Tax credits and vouchers do not build a publicly funded system.
- Under the Community Child Care Standards Act, Manitoba offers the Retirement Benefits Regulation for Early Childhood Educators, a hugely important benefit that ensures the future security of this sector of the workforce. Will this be protected under the new Act?
- Currently child care programs operate under a parent-run board of directors. Is there thought of proposing a new model of governance under the new Act? If so, what would it be?

If you have questions or concerns about Bill 47 and want to support the work of the MCCA, members of the public can register to speak at the Committee stage by calling the Office of the Clerk at 204-945-3636. Or you can use the MCCA's template letter below to write to your MLA.

Jane Doe, MLA
Constituency
Room xxx, Legislative Building
450 Broadway Ave
Winnipeg, MB R3C 0V8

Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms. Last name,

Manitoba's early learning and child care sector is a well established, highly regulated, quality licensed system all of us can be proud of.

OPTIONAL: I work at "child care program name" or have a child that attends "child care program name" in your constituency or I am a resident in your constituency that cares about child care.

As a supporter of child care, I'd like to bring attention to the strengths of this sector and reinforce these assets. This is important information to share as the Department of Families looks at transforming child care in our province.

Child care is playing a huge role in getting Manitobans back to work by offering parents an environment that is safe and conducive to learning while meeting the workforce's ever-changing demands during the pandemic.

Parents who are working to protect us – first responders, health care workers and essential workers – need child care to ensure they can go to work.

Child care is integral to healthy learning and development. Parents depend on early child educators (ECE) to help raise healthy children and set them up for future success. ECEs are much more than just babysitters.

Manitoba needs to invest in the early learning and child care workforce to attract and retain the best and brightest ECEs to provide the highest quality of child care services.

Early Childhood Educators have the same needs and priorities as educators in the school system. Decision-makers, especially during the pandemic, should keep this in mind especially when it comes to the risks they must face.

Manitoba has a strong, longstanding child care system offering care to children from as young as three months up to 12 years. The strength of the sector has been apparent throughout the pandemic, while in Alberta and Ontario the child care sector has broken down and facilities have had to close.

There is room for flexibility and choices in a potential child care reform but let's not forget the strong infrastructure already in place in Manitoba. We should not abandon the existing system which is already serving the needs of 38,000 children and their families.

I encourage the Government of Manitoba to carefully consider these strengths when developing a plan to transform child care in our province.

Sincerely,

(name of writer) (address of writer)

c.c. – Hon. Rochelle Squires, Minister of Families – minfs@leg.gov.mb.ca ^[4]

Hon. Scott Fielding, Minister of Finance – minfin@leg.gov.mb.ca ^[5]

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