

Rural childcare may need public management to succeed ^[1]

P.E.I.'s childcare model might have worked in Manitoba – but it got scrapped

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EXCERPTS

The Manitoba government has taken several runs at improving child care in the province, but fragmented and stymied approaches have thus far left many families in the lurch.

If rural families feel particularly pinched, they're probably right. University of Manitoba researcher Susan Prentice said in rural and northern Manitoba, there is one childcare spot for every five kids. This is about half of what's available in Winnipeg.

"In our area, daycares are little to none," said one mother on a call with Manitoba Women in Agriculture and Food (MWAF) on Feb. 22.

The nearest daycare is 30 minutes away, she said. To get in, kids go on waiting lists and – she heard – might get in faster if you called and harassed the centre staff every day.

Instead, she takes her kids on the job when necessary.

"My day-to-day life is basically keeping them safe and being productive, which is very difficult," she said.

She had planned to return to work on an off-farm job, but couldn't justify the stress. Her kids would have to go to two different daycares.

Another woman on the call reported she had also turned down a good job because of childcare issues (though not recently).

A mother living in Winnipeg said she faced a one-year waiting list for her first child. At the time she was a student, and fortunately her professors were able to accommodate her so she didn't lose all her classes or a whole year of school. She is an immigrant and had no family to rely on, she said.

Her second child got a daycare spot when he was almost a year old, but it was at a different daycare than his older sibling. After the birth of her third child, the woman gave up and took her children out of daycare. She opted to work part time instead.

Earlier this year, Keystone Agricultural Producers passed a resolution to lobby the province for better rural child care. KAP members told the Co-operator they relied on family and sometimes, when they couldn't find child care, took kids along on the job – which they worried wasn't safe, or fair to the children.

Attempts to solve

How best to care for Manitoba's children has been debated for decades. In a "Timeline of child care in Manitoba," the Child Care Coalition of Manitoba recalls that in 1987 the then NDP government made a call to the federal government for a national daycare program.

In 1989, a task force on childcare found a "severe shortage" of spaces. Over the next three decades, numerous committees and task forces studied the industry and restructured how it was run and funded. However, issues of lack of space have persisted.

"The problem basically is that we've been dealing for a long time with governments that aren't willing to invest in building services because they still think, in general, it's just a private family matter," said Susan Prentice, a University of Manitoba professor who has done extensive research on child care in Canada.

"That makes a big problem," she said.

In its November 2015 throne speech, the NDP government pledged to "create a universally accessible childcare system with 12,000 additional spaces."

In early 2016, the Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care Commission put out a report recommending sweeping changes.

The commission, led by Kathleen Flanagan and Jane Beach proposed a "publicly managed, community-based" approach to early learning and childcare – the same phrase they used earlier to describe Prince Edward Island's childcare model.

Flanagan and Beach said the province should establish five "Children's Councils" (four regional, one francophone) to run and oversee

early learning and childcare. These councils would assess the need for childcare spaces by location, age and hours of operation required. They'd then develop an annual plan for expansion, recruit organizations for new centres, support licensed childcare programs, and other tasks. It might also "incubate" a childcare program until it's well established.

The report noted that the funding formula for childcare centres needed to be revamped to keep programs sustainable and to ensure staff were paid fairly. This included introducing a province-wide, regulated wage scale for childcare workers based on their qualifications. It also suggested taking into account that some childcare centres have much higher occupancy costs than others and adjusting funding accordingly. It suggested funding all eligible non-profit centres.

Months after the report came out, the NDP government lost the election to the Progressive Conservatives. While the Conservatives made some of their own improvements to child care, the commission's plans were ultimately scrapped.

However, since the report's recommendations draw heavily from a model that is alive and working in another part of the country, we can see how it may have played out in Manitoba.

Publicly managed, community based

In 2010, Prince Edward Island restructured its childcare model after assimilating kindergarten into the public school system. Flanagan, a P.E.I. resident, came in to examine the system and recommend how to sustain it.

Unlike Manitoba, P.E.I. actually had too many childcare spaces which were heavily concentrated in the Charlottetown area, Flanagan told the Co-operator. Many centres were very small or struggling to stay afloat with many empty spaces.

P.E.I.'s new plan saw the government do a thorough survey of the province's preschool population and other metrics including commuting patterns, to determine where childcare spaces were needed. It then put out a call for proposals to start centres in areas where care was lacking.

The provincial government can also deny licences where it deems there is no need for new childcare centres, the Flanagan-Beach report says. It reasons too many childcare spaces dilutes the viability of existing centres.

The government gave existing centres the option to be provincially designated "Early Years Centres" (EYCs), which required more stringent criteria than normal licensing, but also came with "much more generous" funding, said Flanagan.

The government offered buyouts for struggling centre owners, and it offered free accounting and legal advice for centres looking to amalgamate.

Provincially EYCs are funded at 78 per cent of their operating cost which must cover staff wages (wages are also regulated by the province). The rest is covered by parents' fees. This allows smaller or less-full centres to still stay afloat.

"There's a big emphasis on the sustainability," said Flanagan. "They didn't want to invest in people getting set up and started and so on only to shut down one year, back up the next year."

Eleven years in, the system is working said Flanagan — though not perfectly. In February 2020, the province's early learning waiting list had between 500 and 600 infants, according to local news outlet the Journal Pioneer.

The report says most people were looking in Charlottetown, Stratford and Cornwall, all larger population centres in the province.

In rural areas, spaces are more likely to be available, Flanagan said.

The P.E.I. model isn't a silver bullet. For one, rural P.E.I. isn't rural Manitoba, said Flanagan. She recalled crisscrossing Manitoba during her study and worrying about running out of gas way out on the prairie. The scale is much smaller on the island.

She suggested it may not make sense for some rural communities to start daycare centres. Instead, they might consider family home options or using a room in an existing building (like a school).

When she and Beach wrote the 2016 report, Manitoba wasn't looking to transplant P.E.I.'s system wholesale. The idea was to treat the child care as a system — to plan how to create and sustain it, she said. It may have encouraged more non-profits to come forward and start centres, she said. Today, groups probably look at the numbers and decide to do something else.

"Pretty much we just rest on communities to do it for themselves," said Prentice — speaking about the funding and the paperwork around starting a centre. "I think it's too hard and the results show it hasn't been very equitable."

Prentice advocated moving Manitoba child care to the public sector, like schools.

"You just can't anymore think of childcare as a frill or a luxury that you can just leave to not-for-profits and the voluntary sector," she said.

Region: Manitoba ^[3]

Tags: public management ^[4]

rural ^[5]

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