

Canada's COVID-19 child-care plan must start with investing in early childhood educators ^[1]

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Child care in Canada is at a historic turning point. Keeping with its promise from September 2020, the Liberal government has indicated that the April 2021 budget will include a major investment in a national child-care system. This will likely be a welcome announcement for Canadian families currently paying high child-care fees.

However, this promise cannot be realized without a concerted strategy to solve the ongoing crisis of recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood educators, and without viewing this issue as related to women's equality and the professionalization of the early childhood education sector.

Matters of equality, and quality

Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland called the national child-care initiative "an element of a feminist agenda" and a step toward women's equality, highlighting the opportunity it creates for women to join the workforce.

For a child-care system to fully advance women's equality, the government must first address the poor working conditions and low status of child-care professionals, 96 per cent of whom are women. Put bluntly, without a significant wage increase for the child-care sector, higher levels of participation of women in the workforce will occur at the expense of women working in child care for notoriously low pay.

Child-care wages are not regulated and are generally paid by families on a fee-for-service basis. Most families are unable to pay the fee increase required to adequately compensate early childhood educators. Low salaries, lack of benefits and burnout due to heavy workloads are common occurrences in the child-care sector. Despite moderate efforts by some jurisdictions to offer wage supplement and subsidies, child-care salaries remain well below wages of kindergarten teachers.

Economist Iglia Ivanova found that low wages for qualified early childhood educators contributed to poverty among educators, many of whom are women with children of their own.

Better working conditions are not only a matter of equality but also of quality. Low wages result in a chronic shortage of qualified early childhood educators and vacancies are filled with unqualified staff. Difficulty in recruitment and retention are a major concern when child care is on the cusp of expanding to a national system.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development reports that good working conditions are strong incentives for early childhood educators to enter and stay in the child-care profession. And better working conditions are associated with higher quality early childhood education programs, leading to better outcomes for children.

Natural work?

In Canada, the child-care workforce continues to be undervalued, and this devaluation is perpetuated by the idea that child care is women's "natural" work. It is well established in research that the quality of early education and care is closely linked with the professionalization of the workforce.

The creation of a national child-care system is an unprecedented opportunity to change the public perception on the child-care sector. Central to this change is replacing the idea that child care is a service so parents can work with a recognition that early childhood education holds enormous potential for positive social change.

Most Canadian jurisdictions have developed curriculum frameworks that set high-level pedagogical visions for professionals working in the field. Early childhood professionals are uniquely positioned to lead programs that foster practices of inclusion, collaboration, culture and language revitalization, and more generally support the well-being of communities' social, cultural and economic life.

Professionalization of the child-care sector must also occur through setting higher professional and educational requirements for the field through initial training and ongoing professional development. At present, no jurisdiction requires all child-care staff to hold post-

secondary credentials in early childhood education; even though research suggests that when early childhood educators hold a bachelor's degree, they are more likely to provide high-quality pedagogy, take up leadership roles and commit to the field long term.

Moving forward

Increased federal funding for child care since 2016 made modest improvements in child-care provision. Yet, the approach of sporadic and unco-ordinated funding to Canadian jurisdictions has not solved the ongoing crisis of recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood educators.

The Liberal government's promise to ensure high quality child care hinges on developing a workforce strategy. Such a strategy must include a co-ordinated effort to raise the status of early childhood professionals through setting fair remunerations standards based on established wage grids, and creating professionalization pathways through education and ongoing professional development.

Moving the child-care sector in this direction is nothing short of recognizing the complex and vitally important work that early childhood educators are already doing in numerous communities across Canada.

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