

Manitoba will hold off on boosting child-care fees for now, despite consultant's proposal ^[1]

Province leaves door open to an income-tested model in three years' time

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EXCERPTS

Manitoba's families minister said she doesn't agree with a nearly \$600,000 report her government commissioned that recommends higher-income families pay more for child care.

But Rochelle Squires said the Progressive Conservative government may reconsider once the economy rebounds.

"Three years from now, we'll be out of the pandemic and will be operating in an entirely different economy, one in which it would be hard to predict what that economy looks like," Squires said.

Until then, the province will not thaw a long-running freeze on parent fees, despite hiring a consulting firm which suggested otherwise.

In a long-awaited report released Monday, KPMG suggested higher-income families shoulder more of the price of child care so the provincial government can shift more of its funding share from operating grants to subsidies for lower-income families.

At the legislature, Squires told reporters the pandemic is an ill-fated time to overhaul the funding model. She announced last month Manitoba would freeze parent fees for three more years.

She said the consultant's report was "one of many tools" guiding the province's plan to rejig the child-care system.

"I'm going to be consulting over the next three years," Squires said. "We've got enough time to really hear what some of the solutions and options are to be creating an accessible child-care system."

Critics say the sector is dogged by underfunding — provincial grants haven't increased since 2016 and parent fees since 2013 — while salaries for workers are paltry, the wait list for available spaces is significant and fewer low-income families can afford it.

She said a majority of parents that participated in a government-commissioned survey believe there's merit to a funding model in which fees are tied to income.

Disputes wait list of 18,000

The families minister was taken to task Tuesday during question period for the supposedly growing number of children waiting for child care.

As of August 2020, 18,028 children were on the wait list for child care, NDP Leader Wab Kinew said, citing a document his party obtained. It's an increase from more than 16,000 children at last check.

Squires, however, called the wait list "flawed." She said the pandemic has brought upheaval to the child-care sector, with an "anomaly" of 5,000 spaces now unoccupied, Squires said.

We "know that the child-care sector in the province of Manitoba has gone through significant shifting because of the pandemic ... something that we certainly don't anticipate on a go-forward basis," she said.

"We also know that the reason for those vacancies is that a lot of predominantly women have been impacted by the pandemic and are currently unemployed. We want to get those women back into the labour market."

Despite the vacancies on a provincewide level, she acknowledged some parents will still be waiting for openings at child-care centres close to home.

She declined to estimate how many parents are waiting for spots. A request for an estimate from government officials wasn't provided by deadline.

The NDP's leader accused the government of withholding information.

"To me, there is no reasonable excuse for the minister not to be able to tell you what the current wait list number here is, other than either to deflect from a bad news story there, which I suspect is the case, or because there is perhaps some other political consideration," Kinew said.

The Manitoba Child Care Association said it doesn't keep track of a wait list. The last time the province posted monthly statistics was on June, 2018, when 16,605 children were standing by.

Region: Manitoba ^[3]

Tags: fees ^[4]

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