

Opinion: National child care would boost Alberta's economy and support families ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

On April 19, the federal government announced that it will start to build a national system of early learning and care. The government envisions a community-based system in which “all families have access to high-quality, affordable and flexible early learning and child care no matter where they live.” Such a system would be immensely beneficial for many young children and their families in Alberta, as well as for our communities and our economy. In effect, the federal government is offering to provide Alberta with several hundred million dollars per year to reduce the child-care fees of parents who use regulated, high-quality child care.

The federal plan is timely. Advocates for significant improvements in early learning and care are coming from all corners of society: EndPovertyEdmonton, the Edmonton Chamber of Commerce, the Business Council of Alberta, YMCA Canada, the C.D. Howe Institute, the Centre for Future Work, and many others. It is hard to think of any other major issue that has received such strong support from sources so numerous and diverse.

Recently, the federal plan has been described as a “cookie-cutter” solution that will provide “institutionalized” child care. No one has proposed anything of the sort. The federal government’s plan for a national system does not prescribe a one-size-fits-all way to provide early learning and care; if it did, it would be strongly and immediately opposed by all early childhood educators and advocates everywhere.

There has also been a concern that the federal government’s plan “may leave Alberta families with very few options.” Many families in Alberta already have very few options. In Edmonton and Calgary, median fees for licensed early learning and care have gone up every year since 2014, well outpacing the inflation rate — and in some cases more than doubling it.

Rural Alberta families, and some of their urban counterparts, already live in child-care deserts. Moreover, the recent elimination of both the quality-focused accreditation process and the “\$25-a-day” child-care program have left parents with fewer ways to evaluate quality. All too often, the choices available to Alberta families are now inaccessible, unaffordable, and of highly variable quality — in other words, no real choice at all. The federal government’s intention is to address these very shortcomings.

Some have claimed that using tax money to support children in early learning and care is unfair to families in which young children stay at home. Hence, the federal plan is unfair. This argument is off-target in two ways.

Article content

First, we use tax money to fund firefighters whether our homes catch fire or not, and we fund schools whether we have children or not. We do so because fire protection and education benefit our communities and our economy. COVID-19 has shown the entire country that early learning and care is in a similar category. Single parents, women, and low-income families have been devastated by the effects of the pandemic on employment. The lack of affordable, high-quality early learning and care has been a huge barrier for them.

Second, if a provincial government truly believes in the value of providing support to families whose young children stay at home, or are in the care of relatives, it can do so. Nothing in the federal plan prevents it. In fact, at the beginning of 2020, the provincial government eliminated its own subsidies for stay-at-home parents and kin care, making it more difficult for parents with young children who choose these options. These subsidies could be reinstated, or other types of benefits could be created, to support families who choose this route.

Much remains to be negotiated between the federal and provincial governments. The issues that need to be addressed are not all simple, but framing them with a lens that fails to focus on the real needs of Alberta families is not helpful. We have an extraordinary opportunity — one that has been decades in the making — with tremendous potential for energizing our economy now while setting up a brighter, more equitable future for Alberta’s children and families.

Our provincial government cannot get on board fast enough.

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