

Opinion: Let's go back to our roots in supporting childcare ^[1]

Premier Scott Moe and the Saskatchewan Party have a historic opportunity to improve an overworked and underpaid early childhood education sector.

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EXCERPTS

As has been widely discussed, the federal budget announced on April 19 earmarked \$33.9 billion for child care in Canada over the next five years.

This historic budget for early learning and child care is the culmination of more than 50 years of advocacy and asking for a national child care system to be established.

During the Second World War, Canadian women joined the wartime effort, finding themselves working in essential roles and unable to stay home with their children. The Dominion-Provincial Wartime Agreement was created from 1942-46 and provided subsidized child care for the children of these women to attend day nurseries.

They were ahead of their time, offering play, outings and activities that later would be called early childhood education. The costs for these programs were shared 50-50 with the federal government and participating provinces, including Saskatchewan.

In a July 2, 1943 Globe and Mail article, Denise Neilsen, an MP from North Battleford, said "the women of Canada do not want, after the war is over, any suggestion that the only place for them is in the home."

Unfortunately, these nurseries did not last due to funding issues. Fast-forwarding to 2019 (CRRU, 2019), about 76 percent of women with their youngest child age five and younger were in the workforce.

We are facing a parallel situation again in Canada, 75 years later. COVID-19 has been hard, but it has been especially difficult for women who are being asked to do more with less as they work from home while balancing family and home responsibilities. Many have been forced to leave the workforce as they are assisting their children with remote learning, caring for other family members, or facing other unique situations.

The women working tirelessly in early childhood education over the past year are exhausted from providing an essential service to families working from home or fighting the pandemic as a front line worker. Imagine if we had continued with the system established back in 1942, how differently families would have been supported over this past year in Canada.

The Liberal Party has been promising reform and funding for the early learning and child care sector since 2004, but the advocacy laying the foundation for this started more than 50 years ago as child care groups across Canada have supported a publicly funded child care system. We are delighted that this multi-billion-dollar promise addresses not only the affordability of child care, but the educational preparation and compensation of our early childhood education workforce as well.

Saskatchewan's early learning and child care programs, its young children and its families would benefit greatly from this investment. Saskatchewan programs rely heavily on parent fees to operate and to pay educators. It is difficult to balance the books when with each (well deserved) raise for early childhood educators, parent fees are increased to cover that cost as our supply side funding is not sufficient.

This federal support is offered with no obligation on the part of our province to match the dollars promised. What is required, however, is the willingness to partner with the federal government by committing to expand early learning and child care, to make it more affordable for families, and to address quality, which could improve the compensation for our workforce.

Premier Scott Moe and the Saskatchewan Party have a historic opportunity to improve an overworked and underpaid sector ready to leave this field due to the stress of COVID-19. They can be proactive, agreeing to work with our federal partners to benefit all families regardless of their child care needs. This funding can benefit centres and homes, rural, remote, and urban programs by addressing the challenges they face.

We were part of an innovative war-time program 75 years ago, leading the way in providing an essential service for women and families, but seem to have lost our way in truly supporting parents with the provision of quality child care.

Turning our back on this funding now would be inexcusable to an essential sector that has proven time and time again how resilient and “Saskatchewan Strong” they are. It is time for our government to commit to families, programs and early childhood educators by allowing these dollars to flow to our province.

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Region: Saskatchewan ^[3]

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mother's labour force participation ^[5]

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[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-budget> ^[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8142>