

# For Sharon Gregson, the long battle for better child care continues <sup>[1]</sup>

Advocates were bitterly disappointed by the NDP government's broken promises. But they aren't giving up.

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## EXCERPTS

April 19 was a big day for Sharon Gregson — one she's been waiting for since 1987.

"I was a single parent, going back to university, and I needed child care for my two baby boys," Gregson remembers. She soon learned a harsh reality: affordable, accessible child care was hard to find.

It set the course for the rest of her life. "I quickly became a child care advocate, knowing how access to child care is tied to women's equality," she says.

Statistics Canada reports that 60 per cent of children under four are in some form of child care, while 53 per cent of parents in Canada struggle to find child care.

Today, Gregson is the spokesperson for the \$10-a-Day campaign, an initiative run by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and the Early Childhood Educators of BC.

April 19 was the day the federal government finally made good on what Gregson has long dreamed of — a \$30-billion commitment over five years to build a national child care program.

It was a big victory for Gregson and countless other advocates.

"Personally, I got messages from across the country," Gregson says. "People who were ecstatic! People who were offering their congratulations."

But the joy was short-lived. The following day, British Columbia announced its provincial budget, allotting just \$233 million in the next three years to building out B.C.'s child care system.

It was a stark difference from the NDP's promise of an extra \$750 million annually for child care during last fall's election campaign.

"To say it was a lacklustre budget for child care is probably an understatement," Gregson says. "I think that people across the country were saying, 'What the heck happened in B.C.?!' Because we had, for the last three years, been a leader on child care."

Emily Gawlick, executive director of the Early Childhood Educators of BC, agrees the federal government's commitment was a huge moment.

She's worked in early childhood education for over 28 years and child care advocacy for the last 11 and so was "super, super excited that people are talking about building the system."

But for her organization, too, the B.C. budget the next day was a disappointment. In a joint statement with Gregson's group, the Early Childhood Educators of BC said the provincial budget threw "cold water on the good child care news we heard yesterday from the federal government.

"While continuing to highlight that child care is essential to B.C.'s economic recovery, BC Budget 2021 offers only a minimal expansion," it said.

"We're in crisis," Gawlick told The Tyee. "Child care is in chaos right now."

The province's investment won't allow B.C. to make badly needed changes to its child-care system, she said. It won't deliver the system B.C. families were promised at election time, including linking educators' wages to a provincial wage grid, establishing an effective way to create new \$10-a-day spaces in B.C. through a capital budget, and making \$10-a-day more accessible as quickly as possible.

In an interview, B.C.'s Minister of State for Child Care Katrina Chen said that regardless of the 2021 budget, the government has made

significant progress on child care in recent years. “I think it’s important to remember when we started this work in 2017 and 2018, we inherited child care chaos.”

This year’s budget, she said, focuses on addressing high-pressure problems, such as supporting families with diverse needs, ensure daycare centres remain clean and safe through the rest of the COVID-19 pandemic, Indigenous early child development programs and further wage increases for educators.

“We are definitely considering and exploring better ways of funding early childhood educator wages and support, including wage grids,” Chen added, something child care advocates have long advocated for.

“We’re working with advocates to explore how that may be implemented,” Chen said. “We need to make sure that when we’re building a new system, we want to do it right.”

A parent herself, Chen said she struggled with finding child care as soon as her son was born. Systems take time to build, she said, but as a parent she agrees with advocates in that she wants things to change as quickly as possible.

For Gregson, being a child care advocate is to be an “eternal optimist.” From that perspective, she adds, the B.C. government’s missteps in the recent budget have given child care advocates clear new priorities to fight for.

Gregson and Gawlick’s organizations put out a joint road map that underscores existing demands, like bringing \$10-a-day child care to more families, and adds new ones, like negotiating more federal funding for child care in B.C. to make up for the provincial budget’s shortfall.

“It is not OK for the B.C. government to put forward a minuscule commitment compared to what they promised,” Gregson added. “We’ve got such a long way to go to actually fairly meet the needs of children, families and communities in the economy.”

Gregson is also calling on B.C. families to reach out to decision-makers and share their views.

“I want people to write to the premier and say, ‘I’m a parent, and I need \$10-a-day child care.’ I want grandparents to write to the premier and say, ‘My family needs access to child care.’ I want early childhood educators to say, ‘I want to work in a \$10-a-day site, and I want to earn a decent wage for my important work.’”

The \$10-a-day campaign has provided a template letter to facilitate these conversations.

When asked about these campaigns, Chen said that child care advocates, and organizations such as Gregson’s, are invaluable to the process and to progress. “Advocates, families in B.C., parents, providers and early childhood educators who have been offering support has brought us where we are today... I thank them for their advocacy.”

After three decades, Gregson is still committed to that advocacy. For her, the child care struggle continues.

“I don’t want people to think that this is the way it has to be — that we have to have fees of \$1,800 a month, or 500 people on a waiting list, or earning \$18 an hour,” she says.

“It doesn’t have to be that way. And it shouldn’t be that way.”

**Region:** British Columbia <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** federal budget <sup>[4]</sup>

advocacy <sup>[5]</sup>

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