

Sharon Gregson and Lynell Anderson: Here's the roadmap to \$10-a-day child care in B.C. ^[1]

Opinion: The for-profit business model doesn't work for child care. It is not the way to grow a system. The way forward is to invest taxpayers' funds in new public and non-profit facilities that will be long-term community assets

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EXCERPTS

It's been 51 years since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada recommended a "National Day-Care Act." Yet, despite decades of research and advocacy it's taken a global pandemic for everyone to recognize that access to high-quality, affordable child care is essential for families and the economy. Federal Budget 2021 reflects broad support for publicly funded child care and — finally — includes the increased, sustained funding required to make it a reality.

Federal child-care funding is particularly important in B.C. because our own provincial budget fell far short of the B.C. government's recent election commitments. Families, early childhood educators, communities and employers had every reason to expect rapid progress on child care in B.C. Budget 2021 because, in the October 2020 election, the B.C. NDP promised \$1.5 billion in new child-care funding over three years. And they promised to use these funds in ways that advance the popular, evidence-based \$10aDay Child Care Plan. It was so disappointing to learn that B.C.'s budget committed only an additional \$233 million over the next three years, just 16 per cent of what was promised.

But all is not lost. With \$30 billion over five years in federal funds committed by Ottawa, B.C. must immediately get to the negotiating table to access its share and close the gap left by the provincial budget.

B.C. now has the opportunity to build on the measurable progress that was achieved from 2018 to 2020 by focusing on and expanding the biggest success to date — the popular \$10aDay Prototype sites that, according to the independent evaluator, "improve families' quality of life by 98 per cent." Parents fortunate enough to have children enrolled in one of the current 50 prototype programs in the province report that it is "life-changing."

The \$10aDay Plan is doable and supported by 67 local governments, 37 school districts, community and health organizations, labour unions, businesses, Indigenous organizations and individuals, together representing more than two million British Columbians. The Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C. and the Early Childhood Educators of B.C., who together originally developed the \$10aDay Plan, have now provided the B.C. government with a detailed policy roadmap outlining how the province can and must use new federal funds to deliver \$10aDay child care. It charts two parallel paths — one that welcomes current providers who want to be part of the \$10aDay system and one that creates new \$10aDay child-care programs as long-term public assets, like schools.

Fortunately, the B.C. government has already confirmed that, following the lead of the majority of other provinces and territories, child care in B.C. will move into the Ministry of Education before 2023. Then, we can plan and fund child-care programs — early childhood education — the way we do elementary schools, as a public service and not a business.

We know that most current providers, both non-profit and for-profit, have done their best over the years to provide quality, affordable child care with minimal public funding. Families rely on and need the programs they provide. So, all current providers, including private businesses and commercial operators, should have the opportunity to receive new public operating funding on the condition that they use it to lower parent fees to a maximum of \$10aDay and raise ECE wages to a minimum of \$26/hour.

However, some providers have business models that depend on making a profit by charging exceptionally high parent fees or expecting public funds to pay for privately owned facilities. That is why many for-profit providers — especially those with mortgages, those paying market rent or those who expect significant profit margins — have publicly reported that without charging high fees their programs are not viable.

The for-profit business model doesn't work for child care. It is not the way to grow a system.

A 2020 national study of parent fees confirms this reality. The study found that in five major B.C. cities families using for-profit child care programs pay fees that are 20 per cent to 60 per cent higher than those using non-profit programs. Clearly, the way to grow a quality,

affordable child-care system is not through taxpayer-funded expansion of private assets.

The way forward is to invest taxpayers' funds in new public and non-profit facilities that will be long-term community assets. Strategies for creating these new spaces include: Promptly licensing existing school classrooms for school-age child care; purchasing custom-designed modular child-care facilities; building child care into all major public capital projects and expanding non-profit facilities. When these programs open, they will be \$10aDay sites, too. Government must also provide capital funds to Indigenous governments and organizations to develop the programs that meet their communities' needs.

But it makes no sense to create new affordable programs if we have no qualified staff to work in them. So a high priority for government must be to introduce a fair, publicly funded starting wage for early childhood educators of at least \$26 an hour, and \$29 for those with a diploma to work with infants and toddlers and children with special needs. A wage grid develops from there to include years of experience and higher credentials.

The rest of the country is expecting Premier John Horgan to make B.C. the first province to sign an agreement for unprecedented new federal dollars. B.C. needs to ensure new funds lower parent fees to a maximum of \$10aDay, create new \$10aDay programs with public and non-profit partners, and pay educators across the province a decent wage to alleviate the recruitment and retention crisis in the sector. It's encouraging to see that Minister of State for Child Care Katrina Chen is having discussions about new funds with her federal counterpart Ahmed Hussein.

We knew child care was important before the pandemic. Now everyone knows it's an essential service. With a provincial commitment and new federal funds the \$10aDay Plan is ready to be implemented in B.C. Find out more about the \$10aDay Plan for B.C. and the Roadmap to get us there at 10aday.ca/roadmap

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