

National childcare system must support childcare workers ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

With last month's federal budget, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland declared her commitment to a Canada-wide childcare system not just as Canada's first female finance minister, but also as a working mother.

Freeland's conviction may come from her own experience, but the principles outlined in Budget 2021 reflect an understanding of Canada's childcare crisis as a double-whammy for women and the economy. With childcare fees in Canada among the most expensive in the world, many women can't afford to work, while many others spend nearly all their after-tax income on childcare.

But it's not yet clear if the new childcare plan will go far enough to support another group of working women: the professional early childhood educators (ECEs) who work for poverty wages, often in poor conditions. Dozens of ECEs who recently shared their experiences spoke about working long hours with no benefits, sometimes working multiple jobs to make ends meet.

Without significant government investment, we cannot resolve the tension between the cost of childcare and the wages of childcare workers. For decades, Canada's market-based childcare system has been pitting the interests of working women against those who work in childcare, and the pandemic has laid bare the cost to Canadian families — and our economy.

In a new survey of Ontario ECEs from the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, 43 per cent say they have considered leaving the sector since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The problem is the free market. Compensating ECEs more fairly would drive up childcare fees beyond what most families can afford, pushing even more tax-paying women out of the workforce.

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Freeland has promised to reduce childcare fees to an average of \$10 per day, which will address affordability for parents. But she hasn't explained where ECE wages or working conditions might fit into that \$10-a-day plan.

Canada can't realize Freeland's childcare vision without a robust workforce strategy, beginning with addressing the immediate ECE retention crisis.

First of all, direct operating funds are necessary to stabilize childcare services in the aftermath of the pandemic, as many centres have been forced to close their doors and lose out on user fees because of public health guidelines. The federal government recognized as much when it provided Safe Restart funds for childcare to the provinces last fall. This funding must be continued, and in some provinces, expanded while a full workforce strategy is developed and implemented.

Once the immediate crisis is addressed, the new federal childcare legislation should require provinces to take a three-pronged approach to an ECE workforce strategy:

- **Establish provincial wage grids**, similar to those for teachers, that recognize differentiated staffing levels. These should provide a minimum of \$25 per hour for one-year college certificate-qualified educators, increasing appropriately for ECEs with diplomas, bachelor's degrees and additional qualifications.
- **Increase educational requirements for ECEs** to a two-year diploma, and eventually require a bachelor's degree as the minimum qualification. This will strengthen program quality and provide parity between those working with young children inside and outside the school system, which will help with ECE recruitment and retention. As the national childcare system grows, requiring thousands

of additional ECEs, provinces should expand the capacity of their post-secondary systems to provide flexible full-time, part-time and online programs for new and upgrading students and reimburse tuition for successful graduates.

- **Establish decent work standards to support pedagogical practices** that strengthen children's well-being and development. This includes paid planning time, paid sick time, ongoing educational opportunities, engagement in communities of practice, career laddering that supports ECEs in transitioning to leadership roles, and cross-over with kindergarten programs. Decent work and ongoing professional learning will support ECEs to critically interpret provincial curriculum frameworks and practise ethically in their contexts.

Without a doubt, ECEs are the heart of the childcare system; without them, there is no system. Women's economic empowerment can only be realized through policy that aligns the interests of working parents with those of childcare workers. The well-being of children, the quality of the care they receive, and the ability of parents to work all depend on the essential childcare workforce. Canada's families and economy can't thrive unless ECEs do.

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