

Opinion: For Alberta, \$10-a-day child care is an opportunity bigger than politics ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

On April 19, the federal government announced a historic investment into child care, proposing to spend an additional \$30 billion over the next five years, with the goal of establishing a nationwide \$10-per-day child-care system. The very next day, Alberta's Premier Jason Kenney slammed the door shut on the opportunity by saying Albertans don't want affordable, accessible, high-quality child care. One month later, parents, families, women, and Alberta children are still being left in limbo by the provincial government.

In a province where there are currently only enough licensed child-care spaces for one in seven children, \$10-a-day child care is simply common sense. Child-care costs can be one of the largest household expenses — often as much as mortgage or rent. Reducing those costs to a more manageable amount would mean families can redirect those savings towards safe housing, healthy food, and planning for the future. In an economy where nearly half of all Canadians live paycheque-to-paycheque, these extra savings would be life-changing.

Ten-dollars-a-day child care would be an immediate intervention into the lives of children who live in poverty. In Alberta, one in six children live below the poverty line. The research shows us that allowing any child to live in poverty has ripple effects. When children grow up in poverty, it adversely affects their mental health, early development, educational attainment, employment, and housing throughout their lives, and they are more likely to remain in low-income status as adults.

Childhood poverty leads to less-healthy adults with more serious health and social problems. This means greater stress on our health-care and social-support systems. Investing in prevention now means we avoid those downstream costs and we build healthier communities. Studies show that children in places with universal access to child care have better physical health, developmental, and psychological conditions by age six.

Ten-dollars-a-day child care would also mean addressing the gendered pay gap and addressing the gendered dimension of poverty. Lack of access to child care can impact a parent's — particularly a mother's — workforce participation. Over half a million Canadian women have lost their jobs due to COVID and 100,000 of those women have left the workforce entirely. The result? Women's workforce participation has hit the lowest levels in three decades. A lack of access to child care for women with children under the age of six accounts for the vast majority of the permanent exodus of women from the workforce.

Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the workers in the child-care sector itself are women. Investment into this sector means investing in a primarily female workforce. The people who work in child care contribute a critical job to our society. The workers deserve to make a good living without the stress of high turnover and burnout due to being undervalued. Investing in the child-care workforce also means a higher-quality system for the families who access it. Quality in early learning and child care is directly related to the qualifications and well-being of those working in these settings. The working conditions of early-childhood educators become the care conditions for the children in their charge.

The federal government's commitment offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity for us here in Alberta, but the work is far from done. We need to come together to pressure the provincial and federal governments to work to negotiate a deal that will lead to a \$10-a-day, high-quality and accessible child-care system here in Alberta and across the country.

The child-care sector continues to struggle with pandemic-related issues like full or partial closures or being forced to lay off staff. The Kenney government, however, has failed children and families by maintaining the significant cuts they've made to the child-care sector over the past two years. In addition to ending massively successful pilots like the \$25-a-day child-care program, the Kenney government has cut grants like the Benefit Contribution Grant and the Staff Attraction Incentive which help operators hire and retain highly trained staff. The result is that the largely woman-dominated profession and the families who rely on child care are worse off than before.

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In order to access this game-changing investment, the Alberta government must reverse their pattern of undercutting the child-care sector. They must commit to working with the federal government to implement a child-care system with the guiding principles of

affordable, accessible, and high-quality child care. We need investment into the sector, the facilities and the staff.

This opportunity for our children, for women, and for families is bigger than petty politics. It's about our collective future. Together, we can reach our goal of universally accessible, fully publicly funded and publicly delivered child care for every working family in Alberta, and across the country, but only if we organize for it.

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Region: Alberta ^[3]

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