

Vaughn Palmer: NDP pleads for patience as progress lags on \$10-a-day child care ^[1]

Opinion: The keynote NDP promise in two elections will take a lot more money to reach fruition

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EXCERPTS

VICTORIA — As the New Democrats approach their fourth anniversary in office, they are still a long way from delivering on their twice-made election promise of universal, \$10-a-day child care.

The gap was acknowledged by the minister of state for child care, Katrina Chen, during debate on the spending estimates for child care programs earlier this month.

Chen began by declaring that the NDP had already “supported the creation of 26,000 new child care spaces,” 4,000 more than the 22,000 they promised back in 2017.

“This is the fastest space creation ever,” she boasted in the legislature.

But she also confirmed that the target was still just that — a target. Only “about 6,000 of those spaces have already been opened.”

The remaining 20,000 are in process for “the coming years,” with 12,500 slated to be in service in 2022.

She also acknowledged that 90 per cent of the opened spaces are for-profit and private, notwithstanding the NDP’s stated preference for public and non-profit spaces.

Private spaces “don’t tend to last as long and there could be instabilities as well,” according to Chen. Spaces in community centres, schools, Indigenous facilities and the like, “tend to last longer, becoming community assets, having more stabilities.”

So why did the government go with private and for-profit operators for the spaces it has opened to date?

“For-profit or market-based spaces could be built faster,” Chen admitted.

She provided the house with an example of the slow pace in delivering spaces through public partnerships.

Back in 2019, the New Democrats signed an agreement with the City of Vancouver that promised 2,300 new child care spaces in exchange for \$33 million from the province.

Two years later, about 900 of those spaces are under construction, well short of the goal of having all 2,300 ready by this time next year.

Nor has the NDP got far in its commitment to provide “universal child care” for \$10-a-day. So far only 2,500 parents have been able to get care for their children at the promised rate in pilot projects at 53 centres.

All of those pilot projects are in existing centres — so not new spaces — and they were largely funded by the federal government.

The recent provincial budget included a commitment to a further 3,750 spaces at 75 sites.

But the budget’s promise of \$233 million in new funding for child care over a three-year fiscal plan fell well short of the vote-catching commitment in the NDP election platform — \$1.5 billion over three years.

And this at a time when the New Democrats are budgeting for \$20 billion in deficits over three years.

The \$233 million in new money will take the New Democrats into the second half of their 10-year commitment (2018-2028) to universal child care at \$10 a day.

Currently only about 20 per cent of B.C. children up to age 12 have access to child care services. Chen estimates that by the beginning of 2028, the province will need to create another 53,000 spaces just for children four years old and under.

To fully close the gap, it looks as if the New Democrats will be relying on hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funding. The Trudeau government recently committed to \$30 billion in child care funding over five years, shared nationwide.

“The provincial government has been building on our own since 2018,” Chen told the house, perhaps forgetting those federally funded \$10-a-day pilot projects. “The federal government partnership will be critical to help us continue with our momentum to build this new social program.”

As things stand today, the province will need all the dollars it can get from Ottawa.

Chen is also starting work on the government decision to move her ministry of state and the child care and early childhood education programs, from its existing slot in the Ministry of Children and Family Development to the Ministry of Education.

The move will ensure “we can focus on supporting a child as a whole, from zero to 18,” she explained. The goal is to complete the switch by 2023.

The government also tabled two bills relating to child care this week, one providing enhanced oversight, training and certification for early childhood educators, the other allowing the cabinet to cap fees to keep child care within affordable limits.

The latter piece of legislation would also require the minister to report annually to the legislature on the “actions taken by the government to support the delivery of child care that is affordable, inclusive, accessible by every child whose family needs or wants child care and of high quality – taking into account the social, cultural, educational, emotional, cognitive and physical development of children.”

No mention, however of any obligation to report on progress toward providing access to “every child whose family needs or wants child care” at \$10-a-day.

“This is a long journey. This is the beginning, not the end,” as Chen said at one point, pleading for patience about the slow rollout of “a new social program.”

Undoubtedly. But the promise of universal \$10-a-day child care was a central plank in the NDP platforms in both the 2017 and 2020 election.

Hard to see how it could credibly carry them through a third campaign without a lot more progress than they have shown to date.

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