

Opinion: It's time for a publicly funded child-care system ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A Canada-wide system of early learning and child care will be good for everyone. In April, the federal government announced a commitment of \$30 billion to build a universal, affordable, accessible, and high-quality child care system. One of its goals is for families to pay an average of \$10-a-day by the end of 2026.

As a mom, I know the trials of child care. It was hard to find a space, afford the fees, ensure it was high quality and met my child's needs. Twice, we moved licensed day homes because educators were leaving the field to return to school, upgrading to find better-paying jobs. Once, we switched because the program was not a great fit. This was 12 years ago. Today the situation for parents is even more difficult.

The federal commitment to universal child care is an opportunity that can work for everyone. While the details are yet to be determined, the federal government has said reducing fees for parents will be non-negotiable. This means all families who use regulated child care could benefit, no matter their family circumstance or needs.

Research shows that tax breaks and subsidies are not the best way to increase choice, affordability, availability or quality of child care. A well-planned system, using supply-side funding, can include planning mechanisms to determine where the need is, how it can be met, create stability, and increase quality and inclusion. Increasing full- and part-time options will allow parents to make decisions based on what is best for their family.

Some programs delivering services are worried they will be excluded. However, when you dig deeper, the federal government says it will be "working with provinces and territories to support primarily not-for-profit child-care providers to grow quality spaces across the country while ensuring that families in all licensed spaces benefit from more affordable child care." All existing regulated programs that choose to accept the proposed funding and meet specific accountability measures could benefit and no longer have to rely primarily on parent fees to operate.

It will be good for educators as well. For years, early childhood educators have been subsidizing, with their low wages, the cost of child care, something that could be borne by the government instead. While many receive a wage enhancement from the province, most are still grossly underpaid. A planned system, along with a provincial workforce strategy, could help break the cycle of low standards, wages, working conditions, and high staff turnover.

In a recent research paper, the Public Policy Forum called the early childhood educator workforce a quality linchpin; without early childhood educators, there is no early learning and child care. They deserve to be valued for their complex work, similar to how we respect teachers working in the school system. The early years are a time of rapid growth and development in a child's life. Quality settings provide inclusive and enriching experiences that allow children to explore, learn and develop. Let us move beyond just the "supervision" of children — they and their educators deserve better.

Public investment isn't a scary word when it is accompanied by a long-term vision of early learning and child care that the federal, provincial and territorial governments have already agreed to. Some would say this type of system would "institutionalize" our child-care programs; this is not the intent. The federal government has said programs should be community-based and the uniqueness of our regulated programs considered during negotiations.

As a citizen, I am proud of our systems of health and education. I can go to the doctor when I am sick and not worry about being in debt afterward. And public education (from K-12) is a benefit that all children can access without costing parents unaffordable fees. Well-planned and publicly funded systems are a good thing for all of society. A child-care system will increase the GDP, women's labour force participation, and bring in more than enough tax revenue to pay for the program.

Morna Ballantyne, a well-known advocate, insists, "provincial and territorial governments will be hard pressed to turn away from the initiative, especially since each has stated repeatedly through the pandemic that child care is essential to their own economies."

This conversation about child care has been happening for over 50 years. "Now is the time," declared Federal Minister Ahmed Hussen. Alberta needs to take advantage of this historic opportunity. In five years, we can have a system of early learning and child care that serves

us well, has a place for everyone and reaps positive benefits for our families and youngest citizens.

Jennifer Usher is a parent and works on behalf of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta.

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