

Open letter: Recommendations for building an early learning and child care system in Nova Scotia ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Dear Honourable Derek Mombourquette, Nova Scotia's Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, and Honourable Ahmed Hussen, Canada's Minister of Families, Children and Social Development;

We understand that negotiations are underway for a bilateral agreement between the Nova Scotia government and the federal government concerning the child care funding announced in the last federal budget. We want to ensure that these negotiations take a principled, evidence-based approach and ensure that the funding is used to build a universal, comprehensive, publicly funded and managed, high quality, affordable, accessible, accountable, and non-profit Early Learning and Child Care system in Nova Scotia.

As we have shown, the current market-based approach has three challenges that must be addressed: "the triple market failure of high fees, low wages, and lack of regulated, centre-based spaces." As such, to address all three, our overarching recommendation is: **Governments must provide capital and operational funding to expand full-day, full year affordable, non-profit child care for all those under age twelve, improve the wages and benefits of the child care workforce, and ensure that parent fees are affordable. Funding should also be allocated for data collection, research and ongoing evaluation. A policy framework must be developed that guides the spending, and includes targets and timelines for implementing a plan to achieve these goals.**

In 2020, we released a Social Policy Framework (SPF) for Nova Scotia ^[3]. Its overarching intersectional and evidence-based framework, and its 10 principles must be central to the negotiations and the policy framework.

1. Guarantee Universal Access: The federal funding must be used as part of a systematic plan that ensures that universal child care is available to all who want it, regardless of their income or labour force participation. Services should not be targeted only to 'vulnerable communities.' All children should have access to child care as a human right. We also know that universally accessible child care is more likely to be of high quality and to provide better wages and training for early childhood educators. Only universal, high quality child care has proven to bring the economic benefits that have been achieved in other jurisdictions. What this means practically is:

- **Child care must be made affordable as part of a plan where in government directly funds 100% of the operation of services under a publicly-planned and publicly-managed system that determines where services should be expanded and the standards of those services.**
- **Parent fees should be collected centrally by government in a progressive manner, working towards a capped, regulated, set provincial fee of no more than \$10 per day and free for those below the Low-Income Measure After-Tax. These fees allow government to recover some revenue, while ensuring the service is available to everyone regardless of income.**

2. Build a Public System: It is critical that child care is approached as a public good, the same as public education or health care, and not a business. The various subsidies, whether to child care providers or parents should be replaced with a publicly-managed and publicly-planned system of regulated child care. A system of public child care follows international evidence pointing to higher quality, better access, and stronger accountability. There are a few key steps that must be undertaken to transform how child care is organized, funded and delivered, as follows:

- **There must be a moratorium on expanding for-profit child care.**
- **Funding must be provided as direct operational funding of services, to cover 100% of costs for licensed, regulated providers within a publicly-managed system. The conditions for receiving this funding must include: providing child care at the set regulated provincial-fee (no more than \$10 a day), and compensation and benefits based on a provincial wage grid.**
- **Sufficient funding must be provided to ensure the system provides high quality child care, that is universally accessible and affordable. All three must be considered interdependent and not traded-off where for example child care is expanded but is not affordable, or child care is made more affordable but not expanded, or we build a system that continues to undervalue the trained workforce required.**
- **The expansion of non-profit and public child care must be supported by public capital funding and determined based on need,**

including geographic, age of child, family needs, learning needs, cultural and linguistic needs, and other equity considerations. Capital investments to build new child care must be public assets and priority should be placed on using existing public spaces and properties.

3. Ensure decent work and well-being: We should not underestimate the impact that an affordable, accessible system of child care will have, namely, to assist parents, especially women, in combining work, caregiving, leisure, and community engagement. Flexible child care can help those with caregiving duties to get access to paid work (without sacrificing a significant portion to pay for expensive care), which can impact their life long earnings and pension benefits.

Federal funding must be used to improve the working conditions for early childhood educators-- the majority of whom are women--and allow them to afford the same services they now provide for others. They deserve decent wages and benefits that recognize the value of the work that they do. ECEs are not 'day care' workers or babysitters, they are educators who provide quality child care and early learning opportunities to our youngest community members when they need it the most.

As was recommended in the CCPA-NS ECE survey report ^[4], **what is needed is an ECE workforce development strategy with adequate resources for paid professional development, fair wages and benefits and additional training spaces and bursaries to offer affordable, if not free, educational opportunities in our public post-secondary programs.**

The wages and compensation package (paid sick leave, health benefits, pension benefits) must be competitive. Pre-primary has created inequities between those employed through regional education centres and those who are not. That inequity must be addressed, but retaining current ECEs and the substantial recruitment needed will require the compensation package to be competitive nationally and with other sectors provincially. **Decisions about ECE compensation must be made in collaboration with the organizations representing these workers, including labour organizations, and must address the systemic and sexist undervaluation of this work.**

4. Make it Comprehensive and Interconnected: Funding must be provided to ensure that families have access to wrap around care that covers the full working day in a seamless system. Comprehensive child care gives options to parents, such as flexible scheduling and a variety of locations. Child care is one component of a broader package of necessary family policies that include improved income supports, maternity and parental leave. Quality child care provides both learning and care, and if done right can address multiple social challenges at once: child development; demographic decline; rural revitalization; immigrant retention; gender equality; work/family balance, social inclusion; and precarity for early childhood educators.

5. Practice Shared Governance: While we realize that child care is a provincial responsibility, the federal government has an important role to play in providing and funding a coherent framework of principles and standards throughout the country. **Therefore, stable and sufficient federal funding must be provided on an ongoing basis that is tied to conditions for accountability.**

6. Democratize: To effectively transition from a patchwork quilt of programs, the design, delivery and ongoing evaluation of an integrated public child care system in Nova Scotia must meaningfully involve Indigenous communities, service providers, early childhood educators, parent and community groups, unions, and researchers. The destabilizing impact of the rollout of pre-primary is evidence of the need to improve implementation in a system-wide fashion to ensure no further changes in one program has negative consequences on another part of the system.

7. Advance Fiscal Fairness: Public child care is entirely affordable—we just need to make it a priority. The plan to build a child care system must include investments to reach benchmarks including for universal access and quality care. Child care, like all social investment, should be funded primarily from a progressive tax system, and as we outline above parent fees should not be used for core operating funding. Child care is an investment, which means it brings economic returns. Research shows that child care more than pays for itself through job creation and increased tax revenue for governments. **The international benchmark is that governments should spend 1% of their GDP for children aged 0-5. Canada and Nova Scotia should seek to meet this target.**

8. Decolonize: Child care services must be developed with respect for the right to self-governance and self-determination for Indigenous communities. Child care policy must be aligned with the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Jordan's Principle, and the Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. **The child care system plan must redress the legacy of colonialism, paternalism, and violence that has marked family policy for Indigenous communities.**

9. Support Social Inclusion: Funding quality, affordable and accessible child care must seek to advance social inclusion in several ways, in the curriculum, in the workforce, and when addressing the need for services. Quality, play-based child care with evidence-based, developmentally appropriate curriculum, provides equal opportunities for all children to thrive. Inclusive child care can be especially important for supporting children with special needs and from culturally diverse backgrounds. Funding quality child care brings better wages and working conditions for the female-dominated early childhood education work force. Public child care can offer more secure employment options for migrant caregivers and diversify the child care sector. Support for retraining and upgrading education and skills of the workforce must support principles of inclusion by providing opportunities for migrant and racialized workers. Public child care boosts the social value of caring work. Child care ensures more equitable access to the labour market for women and helps achieve work/life balance. Child care that is universally available aids in immigrant and refugee settlement and retention. Child care investments can also stem rural depopulation.

10. Promote Climate justice: Governments should promote investing in public child care as part of advancing climate justice. Funding for child care can be part of a green jobs strategy that will support workers, particularly women, in the just transition to the green economy. Child care curriculum can also encourage children to think about their relationship with the environment and the changing climate. Programs, such as Eco-Healthy Child Care, can be implemented to ensure best practices for healthy, safe and sustainable child care

environments.

This is an exciting time. After decades of advocacy, the building of a universal, comprehensive, publicly funded, high quality, affordable, accessible, accountable, and non-profit system of Early Learning and Child Care is on the horizon in Nova Scotia. And there is a community of evidence and expertise that is mobilized to move this vision forward. Let's not waste this opportunity to work together.

Sincerely,

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Region: Nova Scotia ^[5]

Tags: federal budget ^[6]

universal child care system ^[7]

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