

Conversations continue over whether Alberta will sign on to federal child-care program ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There are renewed calls in Alberta for the provincial government to back the federal government's \$10-a-day child-care program, and the support of it could ultimately boil down to politics.

On Thursday, B.C. became the first province to sign on to the federal program, to which the federal Liberals committed to bringing child-care fees to an average of \$10 a day in regulated centres by 2025-26, at a cost of \$30 billion over the next five years.

The specific strings attached to the pledge will dictate what forms of child care could be eligible for federal funding, and how much parental fees must drop over the next five years.

Lori Williams, professor of policy studies at Mount Royal University, said the province is in a tricky situation for two reasons.

Williams said it could be difficult for the UCP to be seen working with the federal government, particularly as a federal election looms, as Premier Jason Kenney responds to his base and those who are angry about the perceived way Alberta is being treated in the federation.

She said the other issue relates to the pandemic recession that Alberta is climbing out of.

"We saw the importance of child care to workforce participation and so that's something that's going to appeal to be more centrist voters, to women voters and those are not the voters the UCP seems to be most worried about," she said.

"On the other hand, this is an offer of federal money and for a province that's struggling financially and has a large deficit and they say is worried about finances, this doesn't play well."

Williams said this could be an opportunity for the Kenney to build some support by showing he can work for Albertans to take federal help.

"But again so far, the premier has been governing — since before the pandemic actually — governing as though he's worried about a split on the right, about losing some of the base on the right. And that has led him to make decisions that have increasingly alienated people at the centre," she said.

Economist Lindsay Tedds, a professor at the University of Calgary, said high-quality early childhood education can benefit labour force participation.

"What we learned in Quebec rolling out their early childhood education program was their low labour force participations went through the roof. Quebec now currently has the highest labour force participation rates of women with children. Then, of course, that has a lot of economic benefits that come with it," she said.

Tedds said political ideology is holding the province back.

"The issue that often comes up is that somehow this takes away parent choice. That's what I hear is the rhetoric coming out of the government but that is, in fact, not true. What you need to do is put in place a system that allows for choice. Right now, there is no choice," she said.

The provincial government has previously said the initiative did not provide enough flexibility for Alberta, where more than 60 per cent of child-care centres are privately owned, and came with too many strings attached.

"Our concern would be that there's a federal government imposed national child-care system that may leave Alberta parents with very few options," Finance Minister Travis Toews said on April 20.

"Alberta should simply receive the federal funding, and we can design a program that works and fits for Albertans."

Tedds said she doubts the federal government would back away from key conditions of the plan, which she said includes quality spaces and

a focus on ensuring workers in the sector are well paid.

A spokesperson for Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz said the minister has always indicated her willingness to work with the federal government on an agreement that benefits all Albertans.

"The negotiation process has begun and we look forward to a deal that ensures access to affordable, high-quality child care so parents can get back to work," Becca Polak said in a statement.

Polak did not respond to follow-up questions about what type of agreement the province was seeking or what timeline it was working towards.

Chantelle Hosseiny lives in Beaumont with her husband and six-, five- and one-year-old kids.

The registered nurse will soon be wrapping up her maternity leave and is brainstorming child care options, which could include either three spaces in a dayhome, three child care spots in different facilities or hiring a nanny.

"It is quite the balancing act," Hosseiny said.

As Hosseiny has been shopping around for the best option, she said it has made her question whether working makes sense.

"That's speaking from a very privileged position and having that education and working in a really lucrative field for me. So I can only imagine how retail workers and other women who are struggling a lot more than that, how they would make that balance work," she said.

Hosseiny used to work full time before her children were born. Since then, she changed jobs and reduced her hours to better accommodate her family life.

She said child care needs to be looked at differently in the province.

"We need to start looking at child care as infrastructure. Infrastructure is whatever gets people to work. We use roads to get to work. We need child care to get women to work," Hosseiny said.

The \$10-a-day universal child care initiative would have to be accepted by every province in Canada for it to be successful.

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