

Submission to the Nova Scotia Government ^[1]

Source: Child Care Now - Nova Scotia

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AVAILABILITY

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Child Care Now Nova Scotia is a coalition that advocates for a universal, comprehensive, publicly funded, high quality, affordable, accessible, accountable, and non-profit Early Learning and Child Care system in Nova Scotia.

We know that bilateral agreements are being negotiated with the federal government about the funding announced in the federal budget. It is critical indeed that we urgently and carefully implement a plan that considers its impact on children, families, early childhood educators, and early learning and child care programs in Nova Scotia.

We believe that both capital and operational funding must be provided 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.
- A policy framework must be developed that guides the spending, and includes targets and timelines for implementing a plan to achieve these goals.

In response to the Nova Scotia government's request, we are pleased to propose specific recommendations and outline our considerations for how the significance of a Canada-wide early learning and child care system should be rolled out in Nova Scotia. We outline our answers to their questions as follows:

Question 1

As Nova Scotia prepares to increase spaces, reduce fees for child care, and support access to child care for families, what are the top three things you would like to see government change/update/amend or introduce/consider that would better support access to more spaces for children in all parts of the province?

ANSWER:

Government must commit to a plan (with targets and timelines) to ensure that access to current and new child care spaces are universally accessible and affordable while at the same time raising the quality of programs and making them more inclusive and culturally-safe. This will require significantly changing how the supply of early learning and child care is funded, delivered and managed overall.

Government should publicly-manage, oversee and fund the expansion of non-profit and public child care (not for-profit) across the province, by providing public capital funding and technical support, determined based on need, including geographic, age of child, family needs (e.g. part-time or full-time; flexible in terms of hours and days of operation), children's learning needs, cultural and linguistic needs, and other equity considerations. Capital investments to build new child care must be government-owned and priority should be placed on using existing public spaces and properties.

Government must develop a Workforce Strategy for Early Childhood Educators to address the recruitment and retention of ECEs needed for building an Early Learning and Child Care System, by ensuring there are adequate resources for paid professional development, competitively fair wages and benefits, as well as additional training spaces and bursaries to offer affordable, if not free, educational opportunities in our public post-secondary programs.

Question 2

The Government of Canada wants to ensure that by the year 2025/26 child care fees are reduced to an average of \$10 a day. This means that some families could pay less than \$10 a day and some pay more. What approach should government consider when making policy decisions around who should pay less or more? Please be specific, if possible.

ANSWER:

In order to ensure that child care is universal, it must not be based on ability to pay or whether you are attached to the labour force or in training as is the case with the current subsidy program, where economic and social need must be proven. All children deserve access to quality early learning opportunities.

We believe that no family should pay more than the \$10, with a goal to make these services free for everyone, just like public education. \$10 a day is still prohibitive for some families including those on social assistance or low-waged workers.

We strongly recommend that the government move away from having service providers rely on parent fees to cover operating costs. Instead, public funding should be provided to cover 100% of operating costs, and parent fees should be collected centrally by government in a progressive manner (maybe via the tax system), 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.

This stream-lined design for parent fees allows government to recover some revenue, while ensuring the service is available to everyone. Moreover, this way of collecting parent fees gets away from the current subsidy program, which has stigma, is bureaucratic, not universally available, with thresholds that do not reflect the reality of who is struggling to pay for these costs.

Question 3

A universally accessible child care system means all children will be accepted, included, and responded to equitably in an early learning setting, regardless of their ethnicity, language, faith, ability, gender or sexuality, and cultural ways of being and knowing, as examples. In your opinion what is necessary to maintain and/or transition providers to this universally accessible approach with respect to professional learning, coaching and mentoring, resources, etc.?

ANSWER:

A child care system that is universally accessible must ensure that the principle of inclusion is integrated into the curriculum, the workforce, and when addressing the need for services.

Curriculum: In consultation, it is incumbent on government to ensure high quality, play-based child care with evidence-based, developmentally appropriate curriculum, provides equal opportunities for all children to thrive.

Training: We recommend ensuring that ECE training programs (diplomas and degrees) be standardized and provide consistent training including to address the needs of all children, whether their learning needs or culturally diverse needs. Paid professional development should be available to support ECEs to receive additional training to address inclusion should also be offered. There is no need for additional coaching, if funding is provided to ensure that staff are supported to be adequately trained and prepared with a standardized credential assessment process that includes this training.

Workforce: Funding quality child care means offering better wages and working conditions for the female-dominated early childhood education work force because their working conditions are key to children's learning conditions. Hiring a workforce that reflects the population will also be important, and thus investment should be made to diversify the workforce.

Question 4

The research is clear that the best way to have a high-quality program is to ensure that early learning programs and child care centres are staffed by trained early childhood educators (ECEs). Recognizing that there are on-going recruitment and retention challenges in the ECE sector across the country and that ECEs are the backbone of any successful program, what should government consider to ensure a strong, qualified and stable workforce for decades to come?

ANSWER:

The most important issue to address is the wages and compensation package (paid sick leave, paid professional development, health benefits, pension benefits) of ECEs. This package must be fair and competitive. While the inequity between those employed in pre-primary through regional education centres and those who are not must be addressed, much more needs to happen. Retaining current ECEs and the substantial recruitment needed will require the compensation package to be competitive nationally and with other sectors provincially.

It is critical that a provincial wage grid be set that provides decent compensation and matches the training, experience and actual value of what ECEs contribute.

Any wage grid must carefully consider the systemic and sexist undervaluing of care work in professions that are female-dominated.

Decisions about ECE compensation must be made in collaboration with the organizations representing these workers, including labour organizations.

Part of the funding criteria for centres must be that 2/3 of their staff have level 2 or 3 training. The goal should be to eliminate any untrained positions by supporting those who require upgrading with paid support and free education. Having staff without formal credentials (diploma or degree) feeds the misconceptions about the professional skills needed to provide the education and care required.

Other Considerations

Our main message is that the government must be focused on ensuring that the building of this system is evidence-based, transparent and open, with meaningful and ongoing opportunities structured into the system for input from early childhood educators, service providers, parent and community groups, unions, Indigenous communities, and researchers.

1 The thresholds for the LIMAT (2019) by household size are:

Household size

Threshold

- 1 – \$25,153
- 2 – \$35,572
- 3 – \$43,566
- 4 – \$50,306

Statistics Canada. Table 11-10-0232-01 Low income measure (LIM) thresholds by income source and household size

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