

On the right track: Reflections on the federal-provincial bilateral agreement on early learning and child care in Nova Scotia ^[1]

With the announced intent to expand access, we must underline the need to build a universal system.

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EXCERPTS

As we outlined in our letter to the federal and provincial Ministers, we were looking to ensure that the announced funding was tied to specific targets and timelines that would do the following:

- Expand full-day, full year, quality, universal, not-for-profit child care with a goal to ensure that there are regulated spaces for all those under age twelve who need them,
- Improve the wages and benefits of the child care workforce, and,
- Ensure that child care is affordable for all.

We were very pleased to see that the federal and provincial governments recognize the need to move forward on all three of these priorities. Our analysis provides some perspective on what this announcement might mean for families and the Early Childhood Education (ECE) workforce, given the starting place and the details that have been released so far.

Spaces: We know there is great demand for child care in Nova Scotia. According to the Childcare Resource and Research Unit (2019 data):

- 74% of mothers with children under the age of 2 were in the workforce in 2019; 79% of those with children aged 3-5 and 86.1% of those with children aged 6-16.
- There are 113,700 children in Nova Scotia aged 12 and under and a total of 17,049 regulated centre-based child care spaces for under 12.

What was announced:

- Create at least 9,500 new early learning and child care spaces by March 31, 2025, including new spaces for infants and toddlers, and a new three-year-old early learning program with priority access given to vulnerable and equity-seeking families
- Enhance before and after care options at schools
- Expand the not-for-profit and public delivery of early learning and child care with the goal of moving to a fully not-for-profit and publicly managed system.

Analysis:

With the announced intent to expand access, we must underline the need to build a universal system. Services should not be targeted only to 'vulnerable communities,' but rather built to be inclusive, seamless and comprehensive, to meet the needs of all children under 12 and their families.

Service expansion must only occur in the not-for-profit and public sector, following the evidence.

The auditor general report underlines lessons that need to be learned from the pre-primary rollout, including the speed at which the program was rolled out and without sufficient consultation and evaluation. We warned about those and many red flags in 2017, including how a systems approach needed to be taken or pre-primary would destabilize the not-for-profit child care sector and leave families with fewer choices.

ECE workforce: The female-dominated ECE workforce is systemically undervalued. ECEs have a median hourly wage of about \$17 per hour. If you use teachers' salaries as a comparator, ECEs make 46% (the international benchmark is to reach 2/3 considering educational requirement differences). Many ECEs lack workplace benefits, including pensions, and there is a recruitment and retention crisis in the sector, as the CCPA-NS survey data showed. In 2019, only 16% of those in the not-for-profit sector had access to a pension (12% in the for-profit sector).

Many ECEs shared with CCPA-NS that they were thinking of leaving the profession because of the low wages, lack of benefits and their frustrations with lack of professional recognition and support.

What we recommend: Government should 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.

What was announced:

- A \$500 one-time wage top-up for ECEs.
- A compensation framework will be developed in another year or two.
- Some funding was provided to implement a workforce strategy that includes provision for one-year, one-time investments to provide educational opportunities including specific funding for equity-seeking groups, and ongoing professional development support for ECEs.

Analysis:

A comprehensive compensation framework is welcomed and desperately needed, and must be created in a broad-based, collaborative process. In the meantime, ECEs cannot wait another year or two, relying on a one-time wage top-up. What was announced is not ambitious enough to match the demand for ECEs for the current system, let alone the additional spaces, with support going to fewer than 1000 ECEs already in training or employment. We risk losing the ECEs we have, let alone attracting more to the sector, unless more robust interim measures are in place, while decent wages and a full benefit package are being developed for the long term.

The professional development and educational support should be primarily invested in public education institutions.

Fees: Average parent fees in Nova Scotia range from \$42 per day for infants, \$36 per day for toddlers, and \$35 for preschoolers. We know from the living wage calculations that school-aged care costs (before, after school, summer etc.) can range from \$20 to \$40 a day. In regards to fees, we were looking for funding that recognizes that to ensure child care is universal, it must not be based on ability to pay where economic need must be proven. All children deserve access to quality early learning opportunities.

What we recommend:

All families should pay \$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, thus low-income families should pay no fees.

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 \$10 per day and free for those below the Low-Income Measure After-Tax.

What was announced:

- Reduce child care fees by an average of 50 per cent by Dec. 31, 2022
- Ensure child care fees are, on average, \$10 per day by 2026

Analysis:

Parents will undoubtedly welcome any cut to fees, however, an interim flat percentage fee cut across the board does not deal with in/equity in the short term. There are higher fees paid depending on where you live, the age of your children, whether you need part-time or full-time care, and whether you have your child at a for-profit centre or whether you must pay for special needs support. They could have chosen a flat capped fee like \$15 a day as an interim. Of course, a fee cut doesn't help those who can't access regulated care because there is none to access, which in rural communities is especially acute, therefore rapid and simultaneous expansion is necessary.

- The \$10 a day fee is an average and not a cap, as we recommend, and leaves providers to still collect fees directly for core services. Families will have to wait 5 more years for this fee to be implemented, when the need is urgent.
- Moving away from the current subsidy system is necessary.

As we stated in our open letter, there needs to be fundamental system change where government directly funds services rather than providers relying on parent fees to cover operating costs. This agreement doesn't quite go that far.

Funding of child care is our future

This announcement and the funding committed are important, but there needs to be continued and increasing investment in child care alongside ongoing collaboration with communities on the design and implementation of a full system. Productive cooperation between the federal and provincial governments is refreshing to see, but for truly shared governance, the provincial commitment to \$40 million is not sufficient to build a fully universal and comprehensive system.

Total funding on child care by the Nova Scotia government is \$73,487,178, and if we include pre-primary and primary in that budget it comes to \$220,482,612 (to March 2020), which represents only 2% of the budget and 0.05% of GDP (\$46.6 billion) in 2019. Even with the federal contribution, we would be short of the OECD target of 1% of GDP.

Moreover, even with the additional 9,500 spaces, and including pre-primary, we are nowhere near meeting the demand for children under the age of 12. Additional investment will be needed for the invaluable public resources for children's development, our economic and social wellbeing, and our collective strength. And these are green jobs that support our commitment to caring for each other, which, as the pandemic has made abundantly clear, is essential for our future.

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