

Senators urge better, affordable child-care programs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Today, we add our voice to the many women, mothers, economists, academics, and early-childhood experts calling for the creation of affordable and high-quality early-learning and child-care programs throughout the country.

The pandemic has driven more than 16,000 women out of the workforce, while the male workforce has grown by 91,000. We need to make sure that the road to recovery considers the critical needs of families with young children, so that mothers can participate in the labour force with the confidence that their children are learning and receiving the care they need before they go to school.

The Quebec model of child care, established 25 years ago, has made life easier for many families, as well as contributing to economic activity. In Quebec, the labour-force participation of women with young children grew from 61 per cent to 80 per cent between 1996 and 2016, while in Ontario, it grew merely from 66 to 70 per cent. The cost of a subsidized child-care space in Quebec is \$8.50 per day. However, only one-third of the available spaces are in centres de la petite enfance, which are high-quality, regulated, not-for-profit facilities, and waiting lists are long.

We recognize that, in our constitutional system, it's up to the provinces and territories to administer education. Nonetheless, as representatives of our provinces in Ottawa, we want to ensure our voices are heard in the current context, i.e., after federal Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland promised a significant investment of \$30 billion over the next five years to increase access to child care, and to reduce its cost to \$10 per day, on average, in that timeframe.

We sincerely hope this commitment is met.

The outcomes of the negotiations with the provinces and territories will be critical to ensuring that families obtain these needed services as quickly as possible, and at an affordable cost.

Children are the common wealth of our society and enrich the common good. Experts broadly agree on the importance of early-childhood learning programs for a more resilient and better trained workforce. Early-childhood services ought to receive public investment, just as elementary schools and universities do.

While child care must be anchored by affordability, other core principles are equally important to reduce the risk of illiteracy, and to help our special-needs and vulnerable children to succeed: universality; quality, which rests on training and competitive wages; standards-based regulation; and an evidence-based approach. Appropriate measures must be taken so that all Canadians have access, while keeping in mind the needs of First Nations, Inuit, Metis, and low-income Canadians.

Ours is not a lone voice. We're joined by a chorus of other non-partisan voices, such as the Prosperity Project, which brings together a diverse group of 60 women leaders throughout Canada. A solid early-learning and child-care system increases women's participation in the workforce, as well as children's health and well-being. As they say, when women succeed, we all prosper.

Co-signatories (27), all Independent senators:

Sen. Diane Bellemare (Quebec – Alma)

Sen. Yvonne Boyer (Ontario)

Sen. Bev Busson (British Columbia)

Sen. Jane Cordy (Nova Scotia)

Sen. René Cormier (New Brunswick)

Sen. Mary Coyle (Nova Scotia – Antigonish)

Sen. Donna Dasko (Ontario)

Sen. Colin Deacon (Nova Scotia)

Sen. Marty Deacon (Ontario – Waterloo Region)

Sen. Tony Dean (Ontario)

Sen. Pat Duncan (Yukon)

Sen. Éric Forest (Quebec – Gulf)
Sen. Josée Forest-Niesing (Ontario)
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Sen. Howard Wetston (Ontario)

Rosemary Moodie and Julie Miville-Dechêne are Independent senators representing Ontario and Quebec, respectively.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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