

Peiris: Sask. government should realize benefit of federal daycare plan ^[1]

Making daycare affordable isn't about freeing up parents to buy a fifth wheel camper or go on fancy holidays.

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EXCERPTS

Finance Minister Donna Harpauer's blindly ideological response, sometimes reaching the level of downright silly, to Opposition questions in the legislature about the affordability of child care suggests that Saskatchewan parents aren't about to see their government move toward a \$10-a-day daycare plan any time soon.

Saskatchewan's reaction to the centrepiece announcement in last month's federal budget that Ottawa is committing more than \$30 billion over the next five years to reduce the high cost of early learning and child care services was negative, with Harpauer saying it wasn't her top priority and Premier Scott Moe silent on the topic.

Despite Harpauer noting that her government has invested in child care previously as a reason for her reluctance to participate in a cost-sharing agreement that could bring child care costs down to the \$10 rate in five years, the reality for too many parents in Saskatchewan is that lack of access to licensed daycare spaces and the high cost of child care keep many women out of the labour force.

Two exchanges in the legislature involving the finance minister were most telling.

In response to a question by New Democrat MLA Meara Conway about single mothers making the minimum wage in Saskatchewan — Canada's lowest — not qualifying for the maximum child care subsidy, Harpauer went on to extol the virtues of the province's universal child tax credit, the highest personal tax exemption and the low-income tax credit.

While the lecture on tax benefits was technically correct, it did little to explain how someone who nets about \$1,700 monthly at a full-time, minimum wage job can cover rent, food, utilities and other living costs, and still afford licensed child care costs that average \$810 a month in Saskatoon and \$675 in Regina.

Harpauer went on to say it's important to keep taxes low so families will have more money to spend as they wish, and even low-income families may "make the choice to go without a few things" so that one parent could stay home with the child.

She revisited this point — borne of fond remembrances of a long bygone age — a few days later when she observed: "I had a very good income. I chose to stay home. That meant we couldn't have a fancy holiday. We couldn't afford a fifth wheel camper. But I don't regret any of those decisions at that time."

This is what passes for rational analysis from the minister in charge of reviving an economy that's been walloped by COVID and sidelined many women from the job market?

Certainly, families can decide if the mother or father wants to remain at home to raise their children, or to have a family member or unlicensed care provider look after a child. But for too many families, this is a decision made of economic necessity, not personal preference — not when high quality daycare can cost as much as \$1,300 a month or more for one child in Saskatoon.

The "hard wiring" of brains at an early age contributes to lifelong learning and social benefits, something that workers at good daycare centres with high staff-to-children ratios are trained to do. And in addition to benefiting successive generations of children, a well-organized social support system enables more (mostly) women to maximize their own educational and economic potential.

Making daycare affordable isn't about freeing up parents to buy a fifth wheel camper or go on fancy holidays. It's about ensuring that all children have access to early childhood experiences that lay a strong foundation for the future without regard to their parents' income.

After successive governments failing to deliver on promises for a national child care plan, the current plan has a good chance of coming to fruition. Let's hope that Saskatchewan will step up to do what's right for coming generations of children by refusing to substitute "gut feelings" and ideology for the proven benefits of early childhood education.

Region: Saskatchewan ^[3]

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