

Acting on the federal government's vision of a \$10-a-day national child-care system ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

With a federal election in sight, four-part harmony is needed to produce a successful Canada-wide child-care program — affordability, accessibility, inclusiveness and quality.

With five agreements announced to date, it begins. Now it's time to focus on the prerequisite for these objectives — the creation of a well-resourced, highly trained and reasonably compensated early learning and child care (ELCC) workforce.

If governments across the country succeed in the federal budget's vision of an average \$10-a-day cost and a system available to all parents and children, quality must be top priority. Quality — delivering programming that enhances the development of the child — therefore becomes the key variable of an expanded system.

Quality largely comes down to the people delivering ELCC. This should be axiomatic. ELCC educators and support staff are responsible for the direct delivery of curriculum and program standard, and play an influential role in children's growth during their most formative years.

At the same time, the average pay of child-care workers in Canada is just \$35,000 a year. The signal, then, is that this is not the valuable profession that it truly is. The very people to whom we entrust our children at the most delicate stage of their development should be recognized for their critical contribution. Renewed bilateral child-care agreements signed between the federal government and five provinces/territories commit to improving working conditions and compensation for those in the sector. However, the mention of workforce development is slim, and the details yet to be seen.

Canada has long faced a labour shortage, and experience challenges with attracting, training and retaining qualified staff in child care. Ahead of the pandemic, a workforce shortage of 15,000 was cited. These challenges have been exacerbated by COVID-19. Statistics Canada reports that from February 2020 to February 2021, the child-care workforce decreased by 21 per cent. Not only does this dramatically worsen the pre-existing labour shortage, but the high-quality spaces are at risk of disappearing. Without addressing the labour shortage, promises of affordability, accessibility and inclusion will fall flat.

The acute labour shortage in child care is influenced by several factors, including too few students being admitted to ECE college programs, difficult working conditions and poor recognition of child care as a highly valued profession. Poor compensation — wages, benefits and pensions — has been noted as a top issue affecting recruitment and retention of qualified educators and support staff. These factors must be front and centre in every bilateral agreement signed by the federal government.

Although the April 19 budget forecast and recent announcements have caused much celebration among ELCC advocates, much work remains to get this system in place remains. Child-care providers and provinces alike patiently await the delivery of more immediate commitments, including \$420 million in 2021–2022 to support recruitment, training and retention of the workforce, and the plan to reduce fees by 50 per cent by the end of next year.

For Canada to be successful in creating more spaces and reducing costs for families, we must address the labour shortage and effectively increase the workforce of qualified educators through a comprehensive, national workforce approach. In a recent paper by Public Policy Forum, we call for the creation of a National Workforce Strategy.

The Fall Economic Statement and 2021 federal budget promised investments to the provinces and territories to support the early childhood educator workforce, with a focus on improved access to education and training. While an essential component of a multi-pronged workforce strategy, this on its own is not a silver bullet to solving the problem. Efforts to improve compensation for educators and support staff in child care, a predominately female workforce, must be immediately prioritized.

The easy parts of a national child-care strategy are good intentions and directing money at the challenge. The tough sledding comes in spending the money well and getting the federal government, provinces and parents to agree on implementation of an updated model. Everyone who cheered on the budget commitment needs to maintain pressure to ensure success in creating a system of which we can be confident and proud. And such a system will create workplaces where talented people want to spend their careers.

In absence of a whole-of-workforce approach, we run the risk of quality sliding off its axel and a Canada-wide child-care system being limited by what is already available.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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child care workforce ^[5]

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