

What the feds' child care program would mean for Alberta ^[1]

Here's what's at stake for families.

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EXCERPTED

When the federal government included in its April budget a plan to invest nearly \$30 billion over five years towards implementing universally accessible \$10-per-day child care, many thought it a fine idea.

Premier Jason Kenney didn't.

"Our first read of the federal policy announced yesterday is that it is only for a kind of cookie-cutter, nine-to-five, urban, government- and union-run institutional daycare option," the premier said the following day.

Instead, Kenney would prefer the feds pass the money along with no strings attached so the province can make its own choices.

Four provinces (B.C., Nova Scotia, P.E.I. and Newfoundland and Labrador) and one territory (Yukon) have taken up the federal offer, and Alberta is currently at the negotiating table.

Would Kenney really turn down billions of dollars? We'll soon find out.

In the meantime, it's worth understanding what child care currently looks like in Alberta, and why many experts say it will be vital in a post-pandemic economic recovery.

What makes Alberta different?

The timing of the federal \$10-per-day proposal likely irked Kenney. The UCP had only recently ended the \$25-per-day child care pilot initiated in 2017 by the previous NDP government, offering in its place a one-time payment to parents of \$561.

The NDP program was successful, if limited in scale. But it didn't jive with the UCP's vision for child care.

There are different categories of child care in Alberta. There are licensed operators, which are monitored and regulated by the provincial authorities, and unlicensed operators, which are unmonitored and only visited if a complaint is made against them.

Licensed providers include facilities like daycares, as well as qualifying home-based operations. Unlicensed providers might be private day homes, babysitters or informal arrangements with family and friends. Regardless, there are laws governing health and safety for all providers.

Nearly 60% of all child care spaces in Alberta are operated for profit, and only 20% of all spaces are regulated.

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The objections raised by Kenney and Rebecca Schulz, minister of children's services, generally focus on preserving choice for parents, protecting for-profit operators, and claims that government child care programs benefit urban families over rural ones.

Schulz, who declined an interview request for this story, wrote in a May op-ed that the "needs of parents differ from region to region. This is precisely why child care falls under provincial jurisdiction."

But is Alberta so different from everywhere else?

"Alberta doesn't have any particularly unique challenges compared to other provinces in terms of meeting the needs [for child care], and parents in Alberta would have similar challenges as parents elsewhere in Canada," said Morna Ballantyne, executive director of Child Care Now, a national non-profit advocacy group.

Many provinces have great rural and remote expanses to contend with—though Alberta is one of the most urbanized—and while the majority of child care spaces in Canada are non-profit, Ballantyne said several other provinces have majority for-profit systems.

The only way to ensure that child care is high-quality and safe, she said, is to regulate and monitor it.

“What [Kenney] argues is that it is better not to put public funding into supply side, but to give parents cash so they have more options with respect to child care,” said Ballantyne. “The problem with that argument is that giving cash to parents doesn’t make licensed child care more available.”

This is a point echoed by Rakhi Pancholi, the NDP critic for children’s services.

“Choice can only exist if all parents can find and afford early learning and child care,” she said. “There is no choice right now in Alberta.”

'Living in the past'

Child care costs in Alberta are high relative to other provinces, with Calgary parents paying among the highest fees in the country—as high as \$1,300 per month.

Economist David Macdonald crunched the numbers to determine the potential savings under the new federal plan, based on stated goals of a 50% reduction in fees by 2022 and \$10 per day by 2026.

Within a year, Alberta parents would be saving thousands annually, and Calgary and Edmonton would see annual savings of \$10,000 or higher by 2026.

Quebec is an instructive case study. The province has the most comprehensive child care system in Canada, with median fees less than \$200 per month.

Since its implementation in 1997, Quebec’s regime has proven successful by many metrics, including economic. By 2008, between creating child care jobs and allowing parents to work, the \$1.6 billion program was generating an extra \$5.2 billion in economic activity—in other words, turning a profit.

Big-ticket programs like national child care often get stuck on money and economics. While those are of course important, there are other critical elements to consider.

The issue of child care is a deeply gendered one for a host of reasons—not least of which are persistent sexist pressures and expectations on women to be care providers first and foremost.

The introduction of Quebec’s child care program coincided with a significant increase in women working outside the home, from several percentage points behind the national average in the 1990s, to the highest rate in the country today (and reportedly one of the highest in the world).

Giving cash to parents doesn’t make licensed child care more available.

Morna Ballantyne, Executive Director, Child Care Now

The rate of unemployment for Alberta women is the highest it has been since 1984—one of many ways the pandemic has had disproportionately gendered impacts.

Ballantyne pointed to “the systemic reliance on women to take responsibility for the care of children and adults, and to make that a private, female responsibility as opposed to a public responsibility.”

“When families can’t get access to [affordable child care], it’s women who end up having to take on that responsibility,” Ballantyne said.

Pancholi agrees.

“I think that certainly underlines this government’s approach to child care,” she said. “The UCP are living in the past. I don’t think anybody can disagree with that at this point.”

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