

What the federal election could do to Saskatchewan's recent child care agreement ^[1]

Author: Bamford, Allison

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EXCERPTS

Just days before the writ dropped, Saskatchewan became the latest of eight provinces and territories to sign onto the Trudeau government's national child care plan. But that agreement could be altered depending on the outcome of the federal election on Sept. 20.

Last week, the Liberals committed \$1.1 billion dollars to bring \$10-a-day regulated child care to Saskatchewan by 2025-26, which will help families with children under the age of six.

The party is also promising to create 28,000 new regulated child-care spaces over the next five years and cut the average cost of child care for regulated centres in half by next year.

"Coming out of COVID and the pandemic, we know that women have been predominantly the ones that have stayed home. We need to get them back in the workforce, and having affordable, accessible childcare is vital to that happening at all," said Saskatchewan Federation of Labour president Lori Johb.

According to the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association, the average parent in the province pays between \$650 and \$1250 per child each month for child care.

After decades of advocating for affordable child care, Johb says she was excited to hear of the Liberals' agreement with the province. However, she is raising concerns about what this could mean for the plan if a new party is elected to form government.

"Nobody really knows what's going to happen," Johb said.

If elected, the Conservatives are proposing a refundable tax credit that would cover up to 75 per cent of the cost of child care for lower-income families.

The Conservatives say their tax credit would translate into savings for all families with an annual income under \$150,000.

A household making \$30,000 a year, for example, would receive up to \$6,000. A family with an income of \$50,000 would get up to \$5,200, according to the party's platform.

The tax credit would be paid out throughout the year so families wouldn't have to pay out of pocket and receive the funds at a later date, the Conservatives also said.

According to Tom McIntosh, University of Regina political and international studies professor, tax rebates allow a political party to focus on a specific demographic while trying to capture votes. He says higher-income families are likely to benefit more from the Conservatives' child care rebate.

"Wealthy Canadians would probably save more money under the O'Toole plan because they're the ones who are already paying full freight for child care if they're using it and then they would get the tax rebate," McIntosh said.

"There would be a certain segment of people who need child care and want child care but can't afford the upfront payment and so they would just not be part of the system."

The New Democratic Party has pledged it would take "immediate action" to provide relief to non-profit child-care centres that are in danger of closing permanently because of the pandemic. The party has also promised a relief fund to reopen the spaces that shuttered during COVID-19.

The New Democrats have said they'd also build a universal, \$10-a-day child-care system as well as add enough capacity to eliminate months-long waiting lists.

If the Conservatives form government, McIntosh says O'Toole could face challenges with premiers who've already signed onto the Liberals' child care plan, especially for provincial governments using the agreement to their own "electoral benefit."

"I suspect there would be some very frank phone calls back and forth between provincial capitals and Ottawa," McIntosh said.

Another element of the Liberals' plan includes funding for early childhood education, something the Conservatives have yet to bring up on the campaign trail.

However, the Liberals' and NDP's platforms leave questions for unregulated child care spaces, such as private day homes that do not fall under the plan, and how those spaces could compete with \$10 a day fees.

Prior to the election campaign, the Liberal government signed bilateral five-year agreements with eight provinces and territories: Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Manitoba, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Yukon.

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