

The \$30B child-care challenge: building a new program from the ground up ^[1]

Advocates say that without proper compensation for workers, it will be impossible to build a program

Author: Zimonjic, Peter

Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 1 Jan 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Ottawa has struck child-care deals with various provinces — but experts say building a viable national child-care system means turning a market into a government program and low-wage child care workers into a new professional class.

The federal government announced in April that it's offering roughly \$30 billion over five years to help provinces offset the costs of a national early learning and child care program.

The plan is to halve the cost of child care in the first year and bring daily fees down to \$10 a day per child in participating provinces five years from now.

Deals have been struck with every province and territory but Ontario and Nunavut — but those deals are just the start.

"The way child care has evolved in Canada is that it's a market, it's not really a system," said Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, a child-care advocacy group. "The consensus is that the market really doesn't work for child care in different ways."

Friendly said the legacy of private, market-based child-care services is low wages for child care workers. Wages still account for 85 to 90 per cent of a non-profit child care provider's total budget, she said.

According to a report by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, the median annual wage for a Canadian child care worker in 2015 was \$34,192; that figure varied from province to province. The median wage was highest in the Northwest Territories at \$42,862; New Brunswick child care workers earned the least — an average of \$27,817.

Wages in Quebec are now going to be much higher than the 2015 average of \$35,022 a year because child care workers in the province walked off the job to protest low pay. In December, the Quebec government agreed to a deal that will see early learning educators get a pay bump of 18 per cent and support staff receive a raise of 12.5 per cent.

"The problem in the child care market situation that we have is that, essentially, the parent fees are pitted against the wages and working conditions of the workforce," Friendly said.

Median ECE worker pay in 2015

Province/Territory	Median income	Median hourly income	
		Lower	Upper
Canada	\$34,192	\$16.43	\$18.79

The median income for ECE workers in the territories is higher than anywhere else in Canada.

To bring fees down without government help would require cutting already low wages for workers, making staff retention even more problematic.

According to the same report, monthly child care fees in 2018 ranged from a high of \$1,207 in Toronto down to \$179 a month in Quebec, where a provincial system — much like the one the federal government is trying to build — already exists.

"There are a number of people ... almost all women, young women, who decide that they want to be early childhood educators and they are entering colleges to get certification," said Morna Ballantyne, executive director of Child Care Now.

"The problem is that once they graduate and they ... look around for employment, that's when it really hits them that most places are not paying a living wage. Having been trained, they might go into [child care] but the problem is that they don't stay."

Experts say that a national child care program must be built on a wage grid that establishes minimum wages and sets out how they'll increase over time.

"Within all of our agreements, one thing all provinces and territories have to agree to is a wage grid because we recognize that this is one of the most important areas to be able to grow the child care system but also to be able to professionalize child care workers as well," Families, Children and Social Development Minister Karina Gould told CBC News.

"Different provinces have different wage grids and scales ... We kind of have a minimum that we require because we know that in order to retain [workers], you have to make sure that you are paying them adequately."

Pensions, benefits needed, say advocates

Gould would not say what that minimum is. A government official speaking on background explained that the federal government is not setting a minimum salary but is leaving that up to the provinces to determine. The federal government's role does not extend beyond the demand for a wage grid, the official said.

Child care advocates also say that workers need benefits and pensions to encourage them to stay. Gould said the federal government is limiting its efforts to encouraging, rather than demanding, benefits and pensions for child care workers.

"It's not something that the federal government specifically is requiring but we certainly encourage it," she said, adding that benefits and pensions fall under the jurisdiction of the provincial governments overseeing the programs.

When the Liberals rolled out their child care plan, they promised to create 250,000 new child care spaces across the country. At a ratio of about one early learning/child care worker to every six children, Canada will need to attract more than 40,000 new workers to the industry.

Boosting wages and benefits would help, but Canada still needs more child care facilities, said Friendly.

"We have child care deserts, where we have no child care because no one has turned up to ... initiate [it]," she said.

In order to ensure there are enough spaces, she said, construction of child-care facilities should be included in urban planning the way public schools are now.

A shortage of spaces

According to the same report by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, there were enough spaces across the country for only about 30 per cent of children aged 12 and under in 2019. The problem varies by province.

Quebec, with its own child care system, had enough spaces for about 57 per cent of children under 12 in 2019. In Newfoundland and Labrador in the same year, there were spaces for only 13 per cent of children. Nunavut had spaces for just under 12 per cent of its kids and Saskatchewan had room for only 9.5 per cent of children 12 and under.

Per cent of children 0-12 years of age for whom a part or full time regulated child care space was available in 2019

Canada 29.7%

Experts say it could take up to 10 years to have a fully functioning program in place.

"Building a system like child care, or health care, or public education or colleges and universities, is something that has to happen over time. You need the people to work on it and to work in it," Friendly said.

"It's a long-term proposition, hopefully one that some people will feel the effects of right away, and some people will four or five years from now."

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: universal system ^[4]

federal budget ^[5]

child care workforce ^[6]

Source URL (modified on 5 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/01/30b-child-care-challenge-building-new-program-ground> **Links**

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/01/30b-child-care-challenge-building-new-program-ground> ^[2]

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/child-care-into-2022-challenges-obstacles-1.6287720> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9083> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-budget> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care-workforce>