

Nova Scotia is right to revamp patchwork child-care system ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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The child-care issue has been discussed for most of my lifetime. More than 50 years ago, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women called for a National Day-Care Act. The 1984 Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, headed by the former Supreme Court Justice Rosalie Abella, said that “child care is the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers.” Activists have continued to push for decades for real action on child care and we’ve finally made some progress.

The federal plan, announced in the 2021 budget, provides just under \$30 billion over five years to provinces and territories to begin setting up a pan-Canadian system of early learning and child care. There’s also a minimum \$9.2 billion annually after 2025-26. This plan goes beyond reducing parent fees to make licensed child care more affordable — the federal government targets investments in the child-care workforce, quality of care for children and accessibility through expansion.

Child-care workers in Nova Scotia face poor wages and working conditions. The sector sees a lot of turnover because of this. Unifor members at a child care centre in Glace Bay were forced to strike in 2015. These early childhood educators and other child care staff were not able to make ends meet on their wages. As one picket sign said: We love your children, but we have to feed ours, too.

Nova Scotia signed on to the federal government’s plan in July 2021 and is now working to implement the agreement. Broad details of the plan have been widely reported. Now the implementation is being rolled out.

Not surprisingly, there is anxiousness about some of the details that aren’t yet determined or shared. What is surprising, though, is the work the for-profit and commercial owners are doing to stir up division. There is misinformation being offered to already stressed parents. There is a characterization that this government is making moves that aren’t good for the child-care centre owners, the majority of whom are women, and therefore, they imply, these moves aren’t “good for women.”

Let’s be clear. The status quo isn’t good for anyone.

Fees are too high, spots aren’t available where they are needed or at the times they are needed, and the workforce isn’t compensated properly. Without a properly trained and compensated child-care workforce, you can’t have a good child-care program. Something has to be done to address these issues.

Many of our members who need child-care do shift work or work non-standard hours. Many of these parents have been deemed essential workers. Child care has never been available to meet their needs. They often rely on a patchwork of neighbours, family and friends. While this works in some circumstances, it doesn’t in most others. Having access to affordable, good-quality early learning and care would be a game-changer for them.

Many of our members work in areas across the province where child care isn’t available. Rural and remote communities are spread throughout Nova Scotia. They are “child care deserts,” to use a phrase from the policy-makers.

And many of our members have children with special needs. Their children have been left out because they do not have the right to attend child-care programs. The Nova Scotia plan gives hope this will change.

In the absence of the kind of publicly funded and managed system that the Nova Scotia government is proposing, the establishment of child-care centres has been ad hoc, and most centres have chosen to set up in certain areas of the province, predominantly in the cities.

Child-care workers in these operations largely experience low and stagnant wages, without support for professional development. For non-standard workers and workers in remote and rural communities, affordable, accessible, good-quality child care will only become a reality through central organization, as the government is proposing.

For the child-care workers, they will only see better wages and working conditions through a publicly funded system.

While there are many details that have not been worked out, the principles of this plan are good. Nova Scotia has a chance to lead across the provinces with a model that supports children, parents and child-care workers.

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