

National child-care deal would be transformational ^[1]

This \$30-billion investment would be good for women, children and the economy, Rosemary Moodie and Josh Dadjo write.

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EXCERPTS

One of the most meaningful outcomes of the pandemic is the long-awaited establishment of a national program to provide high-quality, affordable child care. Advocates argue that this \$30-billion investment will be good for children, good for women and good for the economy.

Already nine out of 10 provinces have signed on; the program's path to realization and the promise it holds is worthy of our consideration and reflection.

As the world began to grapple with containing and surviving COVID-19, Canadians saw a startling 70 per cent decrease in women's labour force participation, taking it to the lowest level in 30 years. Some studies reported that 500,000 women had not returned to work in 2021, while others noted a threefold increase in women filing for long-term unemployment compared to 2020.

In addition, data from child advocates spoke to the pandemic's harmful effects on children, whether it be on their education, socialization and mental health; all of these changes were linked to daycare or school closures and changes in families' financial circumstances.

Thanks to leading economists, child care took centre stage as a considerable policy initiative to meet the moment. Craig Alexander from Deloitte Canada concluded that the national child care policy was not only good for kids and families, but it would also return \$1.60 to \$5.80 into our economy for every dollar spent.

In the Senate, we watched the situation unfold with great interest and got to work.

Our office organized a panel discussion in the fall of 2020 with Sen. Julie Miville-Dechêne, who is the former chair of the Quebec government's Conseil du statut de la femme, and renowned labour economist Sen. Diane Bellemare. We invited Armine Yalnizyan and Carleton University political management professor Jennifer Robson to speak about child care policy.

Senators also wrote pieces urging policy-makers to make child care a priority. Many spent hours on the phone with members of cabinet, pushing for progress. We were elated to support Budget 2021, which pledged \$30 billion over five years to build a national early learning and child care system.

In fact, this announcement has become the silver lining of this pandemic for millions of families who can now afford care and for the children who will benefit from it. Nine provinces and three territories have now signed the bilateral agreements, with Nunavut being the most recent addition. Our home province of Ontario remains the lone holdout.

As provinces begin to cut costs, Quebec's two-decade experiment with child care can shed some light on what challenges may lie ahead for the rest of Canada. Quebec's child care system has been criticized for providing insufficient access to low-income people and for its inability to provide sufficient capacity and quality of care. In these criticisms, we can identify some critical next steps for policy-makers if provinces are to maximize these historic investments.

What comes after these agreements? Robust workforce training and retention programs are required to secure a high-quality workforce. Investments in capital infrastructure are sorely needed. The focus on public or non-profit models over a private model is also crucial. Data collection to measure performance and ensure equity is essential.

It took 50 years and a pandemic to get us to this point, but in a matter of months, millions of Canadians will see their child care bill cut in half. This will transform many lives. But after popping the champagne, we must refocus and carry this all the way or else we will see lacklustre results for Canadians. We look forward to working toward a Canada where every child, from coast to coast to coast, has access to the early child care and education they deserve.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: \$10-a-day child care ^[4]

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