

Child care impacts region's growth ^[1]

Author: Stelmach, Lorne

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EXCERPTS

Child care is usually not part of discussions about economic growth, but some say it should be.

Child care is both an industry in its own right as well as part of the vital infrastructure that enables other sectors of the economy to function, a researcher told a meeting of local municipal and business leaders.

Dr. Susan Prentice, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Manitoba, said the importance of investment in child care has been overlooked and undervalued for too long already.

"Child care has got a good claim for being an economic strategy in its own right," Prentice said at a luncheon in Morden October 10.

Her presentation entitled *Surprising Impacts: Economic Benefits of Child Care* is being aimed at business sectors and stakeholders within rural Manitoba to raise greater awareness of child care as a primary factor to consider in relation to economic development.

Prentice noted that is especially relevant as a community infrastructure issue in this area, given the growing populations and labour shortages in the Morden and Winkler region.

"Child care is rural infrastructure and is worth investing in," she stressed.

In order to get a better picture of its importance, a study was done in 2007 to "follow the money" and better analyze the impact of child care.

Part of the study looked at child care in the Parkland region around Dauphin.

Among other things, the study included a cost benefit analysis that estimated that every \$1 invested in child care spending eventually returns \$2. And every \$1 spent on child care generates \$1.58 of economic activity.

Prentice said their study pointed to the fact licensed child care plays an unexpectedly important economic as well as social role, yet these services remain vastly underdeveloped across Manitoba.

"Your local area will do better if you have more child care spaces," she stressed.

Local officials including Morden Mayor Doug Wilson and Winkler Mayor Martin Harder as well as local industry officials agreed that a lack of child care strongly restricts local economic growth. And they pointed to lengthy local waiting lists for child care spaces as being a key issue that needs to be addressed.

"Everybody is squeezed when there is not enough child care," agreed Prentice. "You've got hard working people out there and the system is not supporting them.

"So our hope is that, with more awareness of the value of child care ... we will be able to present a stronger message to the province."

Local officials discussed the idea of forming an ad-hoc committee to jointly form a strategy for child care in the region.

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- reprinted from the Morden Times

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