

Issues- Childcare costs not the only problem [CA-AB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It was in the beer tent at Folk Fest last weekend that a friend came up to me to tell me that, although she quite enjoyed my recent column on the cost of living in booming Alberta, I had missed a critical cost faced by many families in the province—childcare.

If Martha and Henry had a child, she pointed out, the fictional young couple in the article would be facing costs of \$1000 a month or more for full-time care for each child. This is in addition, of course, to the currently overwhelming costs of housing, utilities, and transportation I detailed in the column.

Given the cost of living in Alberta today, there is virtually no way that a young couple starting out can afford to build a life on just one income. But as soon as you reach that point where both partners need to work, you have to add the ridiculous cost of childcare to the mix.

...

Talk to anybody with young children, however, and you quickly discover that the cost of childcare is not the only problem—it's not even the biggest problem. As with almost everything else in Alberta today, there is a severe shortage of childcare spaces available in the province, even for people that can afford them.

In a recent article in the Edmonton Journal, Jane Hewes, of the Early Childhood Development program at Grant MacEwan, broke down the extent of the problem. The approximate population under five years old in Alberta today is about 230 000. Of those children, according to 2006 census figures, 120 000 were in households where the mother was employed. Now compare that number with the fact that Alberta currently only has 25 729 accredited child care spaces and another 11 000 spaces in approved day-homes, and you get a sense of the shortage.

It is not unusual, nor is it surprising, to hear of daycares with waiting lists three or four years long. In other words, a young mother looking to re-enter the workforce after a six or 12-month maternity leave, would have had to put her child's name on a waiting list some two years before she was even pregnant.

Daycare centres in Alberta today are having trouble recruiting and keeping qualified staff in the midst of this boom because they simply cannot afford to pay them enough. Because of the meagre wages, there are less and less people actually studying to become childcare professionals, and daycares are having to hire people without proper qualifications just to meet the government's caregiver to child ratios. And like everyone else, daycares are also struggling to afford rising rent and utility costs.

Thanks to some excellent work by advocacy and parents' organizations across the country, childcare has become a high-profile political issue both provincially and federally. Both levels of government have begun throwing money at the problem in different ways, but as is often the case, this is barely making a dent to the extent of the problem. Part of the reason is that after 20 years of neglect, new funding is simply serving to bring the entire childcare system up to where it should have been 10 years ago, without even beginning to address the new challenges of today.

In 2006, for example, Alberta had the lowest public spending per regulated childcare space in the country at about \$1000 per space. The national average at that time was in the neighbourhood of \$3000 worth of public funding per space. In other words, the province with the lowest unemployment rates, the highest cost of living and the most expensive operating costs for daycares, is providing the least public funding by a mile to operate existing daycare spaces.

This situation is aggravated by the fact that the world's largest multinational daycare chain is in the process of moving into Alberta. As with any large corporation, they will have the ability to operate their Alberta centres at a loss for some time in order to establish market share—this will make it even harder for existing non-profit daycares to compete for staff and keep rates comparable.

Despite their rhetoric, the new subsidy and funding initiatives introduced recently by the provincial government will mostly be directed toward the shortfall in funding for existing spaces, and will do almost nothing to help meet the ever-increasing demand for new spaces. Even though the new funding brings Alberta's spending per childcare space a little closer to the national average, we are still far from being

the national leaders that we should be. It is also still entirely unclear on how a small wage top-up for staff and increased subsidies by the provincial government will actually help create the 14 000 new spaces over the next three years that Premier Stelmach has promised.

It's time that the provincial government took seriously their pledge to fix childcare in Alberta. Some of the necessary solutions include:

- increase per space public funding to the highest level in Canada;
- stop giving subsidies and public funding to private-for-profit daycare centres, as the need for profit moves this money away from paying for care;
- establish a maximum daily cost for childcare in Alberta (Manitoba, for example, caps cost at \$26 per day per child) so that young families are able to afford it;
- require that daycare centres be staffed by qualified early childhood professionals who are being fairly compensated for their work;
- work closely with communities around the province to facilitate the establishment of sustainable neighbourhood non-profit daycares; and
- keep multinational corporate daycare chains out of the province, as they may compromise the quality of care and the ability of existing non-profit centres to be sustainable.

Throwing a few dollars at parts of the problem to appease voters will do nothing for the overall quality, affordability and long-term sustainability of childcare in Alberta. This is an area of public policy that needs to be rebuilt from the ground up in a concerted and comprehensive way to ensure it is done properly. Doing so will greatly enhance the educational and social development of our children, their safety while in care, and will contribute to the ability of young parents to actually work and begin building their futures. It's ultimately about our children's well-being, and about our quality of life—shouldn't we make sure we get it right?

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