

Child care also an austerity victim ^[1]

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Excerpts

A recently renewed federal-provincial child-care announcement and Manitoba billboards promoting \$10/day child care create the perception that the province of Manitoba has increased funding and support for child care.

The reality is quite different. Federal funding accounts for all of the increases in child care spending in Manitoba since 2017. As a result, our province appears to be congratulating itself for what are really new national investments in child care. Much more needs to be done to uphold agreements with Ottawa to provide sufficient, quality \$10/day child care in Manitoba and create 23,000 new licensed spaces by 2026.

Early learning and child care in Manitoba has struggled through Manitoba government austerity. Few parents and children have access to a licensed child-care space in Manitoba. Access to licensed child care remains stalled at fewer than one space in five children. Other provinces averaged an annual growth rate of 3.6 per cent over the past decade, while Manitoba averaged 1.2 per cent.

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When the Conservatives took office in 2016, there was one certified early childhood educator (ECE) for every 11.3 licensed spaces: the ratio had worsened to one educator for every 14.3 spaces in 2022 — a 25 per cent reduction. Like nurses and teachers, early childhood educators have left the sector under the weight of austerity, inadequate funding, overwork, and poor pay.

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Our review of Manitoba government child care spending found that Manitoba cumulatively cut close to \$21 million of spending on early learning and child care from 2017-2022, and this does not account for either inflation adjustments or increases in the number of spaces across the past five fiscal years. While operating grants finally rose by 12 per cent last summer, funding still lagged well behind rising operating costs.

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Nearly all centres in Manitoba are non-profit, which research shows offers higher quality of care.

Yet the Manitoba government has sought to stimulate a commercial child-care sector, offering lucrative tax credits to businesses to start up child care. Provincial legislation was amended to open up public dollars to for-profit early learning and child-care operations, despite high parent fees in the “market” sector — well over twice the cost of care in non-profits.

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