

Ottawa and the provinces need to address a growing child care gap ^[1]

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Excerpts

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New data show Ottawa and the provinces have made remarkable progress on pricing – but are falling behind on availability. As federal-provincial child-care agreements reach their fourth of five years in 2024, the focus must shift to ensuring the creation of new spaces, and fairness for those shut out of subsidies.

In fact, access has gotten worse. Statistics Canada published a study in December that indicated 56 per cent of children aged 0 to 5 years were in licensed or unlicensed child care in 2023. That is actually lower than 2019, when 60 per cent of children were in care.

Of parents who had a child in care, 49 per cent said they had trouble finding it – up from 36 per cent in 2019. Conversely, 41 per cent of those parents said affordability was an issue in 2023 – down from 48 per cent in 2019.

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And of parents who did not have a child in care, 26 per cent were on a wait-list in 2023, up from 19 per cent in 2022.

A study from University of British Columbia researchers also released last month showed low-income single mothers who had access to daycare that was \$10 a day or less reported significant improvements in their mental, physical and financial health.

Unfortunately, too few had that access.

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One of the biggest constraints is staffing. A separate Statistics Canada survey of child-care operators found almost 90 per cent had trouble filling vacancies. Turnover among early-childhood educators is high.

There are many reasons why, but a principal one is low pay. According to federal data, the median national wage of an early childhood educator is only \$21 per hour, barely above the minimum wage in some regions and for those just starting in the profession. Given the stress of the job, and its importance to so many families, that is shockingly low. (For any readers who might think otherwise, it is worth considering how long you might last in a room full of rowdy toddlers.)

So better pay and benefits are needed. Regional and provincial wage grids would help set standards. And, unavoidably, more government funds – including from Ottawa – will be needed to subsidize the higher wages, as raising fees on parents would defeat the whole purpose of the scheme.

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As this space has argued before, federal and provincial governments should learn more from the example of Quebec, which was a leader in subsidizing daycare.

Quebec's experience foreshadowed what is happening now with the federal plan: a lucky few families benefited from subsidized spots, which were even more in demand because of the lower fees. In the interests of fairness, Quebec introduced a generous tax credit that was tilted toward low-income families.

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