

This country needs a universal child care system [CA] ^[1]

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- Full text of article ^[2]

EXCERPTS

The promise of child-care improvements across Canada is disappearing. Clearly working parents and child-care advocates must do more to convince Conservative politicians that communities can only benefit from sharing the responsibility for raising children well, especially young children.

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I am often asked what the ideal child-care system would look like and why the system should be publicly funded like education and health care.

Answering these questions often directs attention to deep-rooted values. Important as these may be, societal changes over the last 50 years matter, too. A system of child care is indispensable for Canadians today. In a country where diversity is respected, we need a flexible system that sets child-care needs at the centre of national social and economic life. For too long, the debate has been allowed to slide messily off government agendas.

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A national program cannot be built through employer-based programs. There were only 338 employer-based child-care centres in Canada in 2000 and fewer than half were created in the private sector.

What would the "right" plan look like?

For a start, the Conservatives' \$1,200 can be easily eclipsed if the Dalton McGuinty government reversed its clawback of the National Child Benefit Supplement. Currently, it passes on only the annual cost-of-living increases allowed by Ottawa. Economically marginalized families would qualify annually for this supplement of about \$1,460 for each child.

Second, the creation of flexible spaces in community based child-care centres must be addressed. These spaces could be incorporated into existing centres as a second shift. Waterloo Region already employs 500 regulated providers to support flexible, licensed child care.

And third, parents want high quality, early learning and care in and around their elementary schools. Best Start was heading in this direction by providing direct funding toward capital projects for schools. This model would have ensured before-and-after school care. With some additional "promised funding," it also addressed special-needs child care, which had fallen off the radar while we waited 12 years for the Liberals' promised universal system.

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Federal and provincial governing parties have offered limp handshakes in their insincere efforts to further early learning and care. We now find ourselves in the untenable position of hoping the Bloc Québécois, NDP and Liberal parties will stand up for children in Canada. A deal is a deal and Harper, in his quest for a future majority government, should recognize and honour the signed provincial agreements.

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