

No more patchwork child care [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Research has confirmed that high quality early learning programs benefit all children, whether or not their mother is in the paid workforce. But, as a hard-hitting new OECD report has shown, Canadian social policy has not kept pace with social trends or current knowledge.

Across Canada, families face the same barriers. There is not enough regulated child care to meet demand. Many existing programs are of questionable quality. Either childcare doesn't exist in communities or programs have long waiting lists. With daily fees running as high as \$60 or \$70 for the youngest children, costs are a significant barrier. Most Canadian families are left on their own. They may work opposite shifts to cover their children's care or make the best arrangements they can, relying on relatives or neighbours, or use unregulated arrangements. (This, says the OECD report, is "an issue of real concern. Quality enforcement in the regulated sector is difficult enough, but impossible in the unregulated sector."

Some unions like the Canadian Auto Workers and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers have negotiated with their employers to create child care programs. Many of us have done our part, yet we cannot come close to meeting the needs. If Canada is to solve our child care crisis, governments need to take leadership.

Fortunately, the federal government is ready to move on its election promise to invest substantial new public dollars to build "a Canada-wide system of early learning and child care . . . that will ensure all children have access to high-quality, government-regulated spaces at affordable costs to parents."

The Minister in charge, Ken Dryden, views this as the next great social initiative, as significant as the establishment of Medicare or public education. Next week, Dryden will sit down with his provincial/territorial counterparts to begin discussions on an agreement for the flow of money.

Let us hope the players can rise above their usual jurisdictional wrangling to put children first. This has to be about more than who gets how much, with the fewest strings. Our political leaders are charged with the responsibility for transforming Canada's sorry patchwork of services into the kind of publicly funded system of early learning and child care from which children in other countries so richly benefit.

As the social development ministers begin their negotiations that will culminate in a national child care program, we offer the following practical advice based on our experience:

- Be clear about how child care money can be used. Child care funds should be dedicated to ensuring high quality developmental early learning and child care, not under-funded, poorly designed and poorly resourced arrangements. Decisions about the use of money should be based on the substantial research demonstrating the dividends that these kinds of programs provide for the individual child, the family and society as a whole.
- Fund child care programs directly, not using vouchers or subsidies. Vouchers or subsidies to parents do not create child care. Too few autoworkers can use the subsidies negotiated for them because there are not enough spaces. As the OECD said ". . . A change in funding may be envisaged, with a move away from personal subsidy mechanisms toward operational funding and an entitlement for children, as in the traditional education model." Indeed, we wouldn't have a public education system today if our ancestors had had to rely on education chits.
- Support a well-trained, resourced and compensated child care workforce. Adequate resources and good child-staff ratios mean that qualified staff will be able to meet the needs of the children. Good pay and benefits address the high staff turnover that plagues many child care programs. If we believe that child care centres should deliver early learning, how we treat the people who provide it is critical.
- Ensure accountability for the funding. Public funds should go only to care for children, so we suggest that, ultimately, early learning and child care is public or not-for-profit. This will mean formulating a transition plan that recognizes the current mixed delivery system. There is no room for profit in publicly funded early learning and child care.

This is an opportunity to get the fundamentals right. Let's enshrine the key components in law and provide adequate funding to get the foundations up and running. Then we can grow the system within a reasonable timeframe.

Now is Canada's time to get it right.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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