

# Report spurs push for child care reform<sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

The hard-hitting OECD report that chastises Canada for its underfunded and faltering system of early childhood education was hardly news to Katja Heineck.

When she starts a new job next week she will be taking home less money once the child care fees for her two-year-old son Francisco are covered than she did while collecting employment insurance for the past two months.

A single mother renting a downtown apartment, she thought herself a prime candidate for a child care subsidy. But with more than \$5,000 tucked into an RRSP and an education savings plan for Francisco -- money she saved after a short contract working as a midwife in the Arctic last winter -- she was considered too wealthy for even a dollar of subsidy.

Too strapped to afford a space in the spanking-new child care centre near her home, she passed up a coveted spot when one came open, and instead patched together a mix of arrangements that rank far behind the licensed, government-run centre she wanted.

Like thousands of parents across Canada, Ms. Heineck is too poor to afford the lofty fees of regulated child care, but too rich to qualify for a government subsidy.

The prohibitive cost of child care for all but the wealthiest families and the inequitable doling out of subsidies to the poorest are major failings that are excluding a majority of the country's youngest children from Canada's system of early childhood education, the Paris-based Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development said in the report.

While the international investigators found some child care centres to be high-calibre, they found many to be housed in shabby premises with poorly trained, overprotective teachers and children who spent far too long seated indoors.

The OECD also took issue with the philosophical underpinnings of child care in Canada: Rather than a public entitlement for all children as it is in most of Europe, it is seen as a private responsibility where all but the poorest families -- those receiving subsidies like a welfare-style benefit -- are forced to pay thousands of dollars a year in fees.

The report, which condemns Canada for disregarding the very research on the importance of early childhood learning that it has been a world leader in producing, was nonetheless applauded by government ministers, child care researchers, and advocates alike. It is a piece of perfect timing for the coming meeting of social-services ministers in Ottawa starting Nov. 1 where drafting a national system of early childhood education and care tops the agenda they say.

In Ottawa, Social Development Minister Ken Dryden said that the OECD report confirms it is time for Canada to shift its thinking from child care as a custodial service.

The OECD report calls on the federal and provincial governments to draft a coherent vision for a publicly-funded system of early childhood education and care, based on the latest social science, and with firm steps, benchmarks, time frames and budgets for a plan to put in place a high-quality national system of early learning available to every child no matter where they live.

With the report coming on the heels of a Throne Speech pledge of \$1-billion invested in each of the next five years in the early childhood education and care system, there lies the potential for history in the making.

"If this was 1947 in Swift Current and they were talking about health care, it looked absurd and yet we've seen health care grow to be one of our cherished programs," said Susan Prentice, a sociologist at the University of Manitoba who has researched child care issues for years. "I think that supporting children and families will have the same effects for Canada. The question is, will the politicians be brave enough?"

"They're challenging us," said Kathleen Flanagan-Rochon, director of the children's secretariat in Prince Edward Island, one of the four provinces reviewed in the report, along with Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. "There's great potential in what we can do, and they're challenging us to get to that potential."

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

**Region:** Canada<sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** subsidy<sup>[3]</sup>

affordability<sup>[4]</sup>

quality<sup>[5]</sup>

availability <sup>[6]</sup>  
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