

A solid blueprint for national child care [CA] ^[1]

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Child care has surfaced as a key issue in the federal election campaign. The NDP, Bloc Quebecois and the Greens all have forward-looking child care proposals. And this week, the Liberals released a platform that includes a five-year, \$5-billion child-care program. As an expert who has long advocated more public financing in this area, I am gratified to see this election could move the issue forward in a historic way.

But what makes a good child-care platform? Because Canada has been a laggard in this area for at least a decade, we have the opportunity to draw on evidence from other developed nations that provide families with accessible, high-quality care. Within our own borders, Quebec's publicly subsidized system also provides useful lessons.

The Liberal's child-care platform is encouraging in that it blends early childhood education with child-care. A 2001 international comparative study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development found that "a strong and equal partnership" between care and education is a key element underpinning effective programs. Quebec's program is based on this premise as well.

For parents who want their children to thrive in an environment that is caring and stimulating, such integration is a no-brainer. Yet Canada has a long history of dividing "care" and "early childhood education" -- a situation that wastes public resources and family time by forcing frazzled parents to shuttle back and forth between child-care arrangements and kindergartens. Both the Liberal and NDP platforms recognize that it's time to change our traditional approach.

A second feature is related to the sensitive issue of federal leadership in a sphere that, like health, falls under provincial jurisdiction. Whatever scheme is adopted, it is likely that provincial and territorial governments will determine many of the details. But the Liberal platform recognizes that, without a solid national policy framework, backed up by substantial federal financing, early learning and child care are unlikely to deliver what families need. As the OECD has emphasized, it's important that there be a "lead ministry that works in co-operation with other departments and sectors."

Federally, this would probably mean Social Development Canada. And any child-care program of the sort set out in the Liberal platform would likely grow out of the 2003 Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care -- an agreement between Ottawa and the provinces (except Quebec) that regulates the flow of federal dollars to provincial child care programs. Just as the Canada Health Act sets conditions for provinces that receive federal medicare money, provinces receiving child-care funding would be required to meet the principles identified in the Liberal proposal.

A five-year financing commitment is not enough to build a universal child-care program that can accommodate all children whose parents choose it. Building such a program will take at least a decade and would cost much more -- likely as much as the 1% of GDP that a 1996 European Commission committee recommended as a minimum. (In Canada's case, this would amount to about \$10-billion per year.)

Moreover, there are many policy and program details yet to be discussed and determined. The Liberal proposal would require that provinces receiving federal cash offer high-quality child care that's affordable to rich and poor parents alike. But how is "affordable" defined? Seven dollars a day, the price in Quebec, is affordable. Is \$20? Or would another kind of mechanism such as a sliding fee scale be used?

And will this program even see the light of day? Governments of all stripes -- including the federal Liberals -- have promised ambitious child-care programs in the past that haven't materialized for one reason or another.

I hope a program materializes as a result of this election. If sustained, a national program that follows the Liberals' blueprint just might deliver the universal, high-quality early learning and child care that Canadian parents -- and children -- deserve.

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