

Child care tops agenda for NDP [CA-BC]^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Affordable, accessible child care would be a top priority of a New Democratic government in B.C., provincial party leader Carole James promised Tuesday.

Parents would still have to pay some of the costs, but not nearly as much as they are saddled with under the Liberal government, James said.

"I think the Liberals have downloaded all their costs onto low- and middle-income families and I think child care is one of those pieces that they've basically said: 'You need to pay for it yourself,' " said James.

After the Liberals swept to power in 2001, they cancelled the NDP's Child Care B.C. program, which subsidized rates for before- and after-school care programs. They also tightened eligibility regulations, reducing the number of families eligible for child-care subsidies.

Consequently, costs for before- and after-school care for most British Columbians have almost doubled in less than three years. Parents in Oak Bay-area elementary schools, for instance, are paying \$12.35 per day to the local recreation centre for before- and after-school care for each child

Grade 1 and up, compared to \$7 per day under the NDP program.

But Murray Coell, minister of community, aboriginal and women's services, rejects the claim that the Liberals aren't making child care a priority.

Coell said his ministry's overall child-care budget of \$162.8 million this fiscal year is not much less than that of the NDP in 2001-01, when it totalled just over \$166 million.

The Child Care B.C. program simply wasn't sustainable beyond the one year that the NDP ran it, Coell said. Instead, the Liberals refocused child care funding on those who really need it, he said.

But critics say government's tightening of eligibility rules means fewer families are qualifying for low-income exemptions. "You have to be living in abject poverty to qualify," said Simon Fraser University child care assistant director Sharon Gregson who is also B.C. representative for the advocacy group Parent Voices.

Even those who qualify for subsidies still have significant costs, Gregson said. The maximum subsidy for each school-age child is \$173 per month; for those age three to five, it's \$368 a month and for toddlers it's \$528 a month. These amounts have basically remained static, she said, while costs have risen.

Coell said his government's spending on low-income subsidies for child care is \$106.7 million this year, not significantly less than the NDP's budget of \$121.8 million in 2000-01. As well, refocusing programs has helped create about 25,000 new child care spaces in B.C., with 70,000 now available, he said.

- reprinted from the Times Colonist

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