

Subsidized child care delivers future payoffs [CA] ^[1]

Opinion

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Source: National Post

Format: Article

Publication Date: 31 Mar 2003

AVAILABILITY

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In past months, child care has again bobbed to the top of Canadian political agendas. Following the federal Throne Speech's flagging of "early learning and quality child care," it was prominent in the run-up to the federal budget. Subsequent to a rather disappointing allocation by the Finance Department, HRDC Minister Jane Stewart was able to secure an intergovernmental agreement with all provinces and territories. Significantly, this agreement includes several conditions that begin to set out the shape of what observers hope will become Canada's first new national social program of the 21st century. Those of us who have experienced previous unsuccessful attempts to establish a national childcare strategy are cautiously optimistic that this may be the long sought first step.

As this first national childcare agreement was being secured, new advocates such as business leaders and other non-traditional partners were in evidence, supporting a long-term goal of universal access to early childhood education and care (ECEC). It is also noteworthy that the usual suspects who disapprove of early childhood education and care for one reason or another -- or at least oppose public support to it -- were relatively restrained. This is encouraging because it may signal that Canada is ready to catch up with the other countries that have undertaken to make ECEC part of the mainstream fabric of family and public life.

Certainly, there is evidence that the Canadian public is ready for this. A recent public opinion poll found that 90% of Canadians agreed or strongly agreed that "Canada should have a nationally co-ordinated childcare plan" and 86% agreed or strongly agreed that "there should be a publicly funded childcare system that makes quality child care available to all Canadian children." As this is consistent with, but higher than, previous polls, support by the public at large for ECEC seems to be growing.

The opposition to early childhood education and care services has been fairly predictable over the years. A soon-to-be published paper by two University of Toronto economists identifies and analyzes what it calls "eight myths" that have been used to oppose public funding for ECEC services. These range from "child care harms children emotionally" to "public funding of child care discriminates against stay-at-home moms." Recently, an opinion piece in this newspaper assembled a collection of arguments against government support for child care that fits the "mythic" description. As this story goes, there is no crisis in child care: Data sowing this is obviously contrived -- by Marxists, yet! Parents overwhelmingly prefer unregulated care; we know this because this is what the majority of families use. Evidence that the absence of child care is a problem is a plot to "institutionalize the nation's children from birth." And, finally, if a problem does exist, its solution is only as far away as the latest multinational childcare firm that trades on the stock exchange!

This yarn runs counter to what is known about child care. There is good information drawn from what has become a large body of evidence that is international in nature and relies on multiple disciplines. First, research shows that child care is beneficial for children developmentally if it is high quality. In this sense, high quality child care is inseparable from early childhood education. This is true whether the child comes from a poor or wealthy family and whether the mother is in the paid labour force or not. Second, several structural factors are associated with quality: regulation, financing and for-profit versus non-profit status. Third, these factors are associated with another level of quality-producing variables -- staff training in early childhood education, wages and turnover. Fourth, the marketplace doesn't work well for child care. A systematic, well-designed public policy approach is much more effective if the goal is equitable access to high quality services. Finally, while affordable high quality child care requires considerable public investment, public funds spent on services that provide both early childhood education and support parents' employment deliver payoff in the future.

Today, few people would argue that Canada's ECEC arrangements are adequate. There is a substantial gap between the present situation and universal access to high quality services. Moving forward will require considerable policy and program development and resources. But ECEC is no longer an unknown fringe idea that can be debated using myths. In a 2000 study, the OECD identified some keys to effective practice in ECEC -- a systematic approach, strong partnership with education, a universal approach to access, close attention to quality and substantial public financing. The study points out that, in OECD countries, "policymakers have recognized that equitable access to quality early childhood education and care can strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning for all children and support the broad educational and social needs of families." Putting this vision into practice in Canada will require solid information, extensive work and political will -- not myths.

reprinted from The National Post

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