

Ottawa pressed to boost child-care spaces [CA] ^[1]

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Source: Canadian Press

Format: Article

Publication Date: 24 Oct 2002

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Father of two Shawn Springer doesn't need a report — like the one released today by a coalition against child poverty — to tell him Canada's child-care system isn't meeting the needs of many parents and kids.

Springer, a self-employed renovator whose wife is studying to be a midwife, spends about \$400 monthly above what he gets from provincial child-care subsidies for three-year-old Oliver and eight-year-old Daniel.

"We're living in debt, to be honest, until my wife graduates from university," Springer said when asked how he can relate to a new report by Campaign 2000, a coalition of community organizations that is lobbying for a universal child-care system.

Provincial subsidy systems which are inconsistent across the country are a prime reason 82 per cent of kids under age six didn't have access to a regulated child-care centre in 2001, says the principal researcher of the report funded by Human Resources Development Canada.

"Canadian children deserve better," writes Mab Oloman, a Vancouver child-care expert, in *Diversity or Disparity? Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada*.

"Not only is availability (of child-care spaces) a barrier to access, but the additional barrier of affordability prohibits many moderate -to- low-income families from enrolling their children in early childhood education centre services even if spaces are available in their communities."

The report tracked government policy and spending on early childhood education and care services. It focuses on provincial subsidy spending in Newfoundland, Saskatchewan, Ontario and British Columbia.

Under a September 2000 early childhood development agreement, Ottawa is transferring \$2.2 billion to the provinces during a five-year period ending in 2006 to improve services for kids under six.

An Ottawa spokesperson for Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart — who was in Prince Edward Island today — said the results from the Campaign 2000 study aren't all negative.

In fact, it found that spaces are becoming available because of the drop in Canada's under-age-six population, said Andrew Graham.

"There is volition on the part of the government to increase opportunities for early learning and access to quality child care," said Graham, noting that it will take some time for the government to assess the study.

The report notes that huge funding disparities across Canada — based on cost of living, wages and other factors in each province — are still resulting in not enough child-care spaces to meet demand.

For instance, in Newfoundland there are only enough regulated spaces to accommodate 14 per cent of kids under six, while 52 per cent of these kids have mothers in the labour force. In Ontario, 17 per cent of under-six kids can be accommodated in a regulated setting, but 60 per cent of them have working mothers.

In Saskatchewan, eight per cent of the under-six population can be accommodated, while 58 per cent of those kids have working mothers; and in British Columbia, there are regulated spaces for 26 per cent of under-sixes, with 56 per cent of mothers in the labour force.

As well, says Oloman, each province has a maximum amount it gives to parents to cover child care, and it's usually woefully below what's needed to get them into services.

In Saskatchewan and British Columbia, for instance, families poor enough to be eligible for full subsidies must find between \$3,000 and \$5,000 a year to pay for child care, the report found. That's well out of the reach of many working single mothers, for instance, many of whom have annual incomes of only about 10,000.

The report also examined child-care workers' wages in three provinces in the study, and found they fall far below average wages for all employees.

Annual earnings for B.C. child-care workers are \$24,000, in Saskatchewan they're \$20,005 and in Newfoundland it's \$15,109.

Laurel Rothman of Campaign 2000 says Canada lags behind other countries in making quality early childhood education accessible for families.

"It doesn't make any sense," said Rothman. "We know child care is early learning and the basis for lifelong learning, essential for building good citizens who are going to be effective workers. It should be for anybody who wants it, very much the way things are in Europe.

"But in Canada, it's not being subsidized enough and there aren't enough spaces."

Rothman said 41 per cent of three-year-olds in the United States, for instance, are in regulated centres. In Canada, only 18 per cent of kids under six in 2001 were getting such care, the Coalition 2000 report found.

-Reprinted from Canadian Press

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