

Day-care subsidies urged: Study recommends boosting funding by up to \$20M a year [CA-AB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Day-care funding would be increased by up to \$20 million a year in subsidies to parents or day-care operators under new recommendations made to the provincial government.

A study done by KPMG Consulting LP concludes the way to improve quality and keep day-care staff in the industry is to hike the amount of provincial cash going into the system.

The report, intended to be an arm's-length assessment of day-care issues and potential solutions, was commissioned by Children Services Minister Iris Evans in the wake of several protests and intense lobbying by day-care workers and parents beginning early last year.

It proposes a range of subsidies to either operators or parents who qualify at a forecast cost of between \$12 million and \$20 million a year. Jane Hewes, a member of the board of the Canadian Child Care Federation, said it's essential that the funding be made available and that it go to the workers.

Hewes also heads the early childhood development program at Grant MacEwan College.

Hewes said there's all kinds of research that points to the importance of the early childhood years and people who do the work need to be well-trained. She said the quality of the child's experience is tied to wages and working conditions of staff.

But she said many people in the field work for minimum wage or a little more. She said many workers have a college diploma.

"We know how to train for this, we know how to make it good, but we've got to have enough resources in the pockets of the people who are doing the work. This is fair compensation for very, very important work."

Based on parents' fees alone, Hewes said the workers make a poor salary. "Parents can't afford to pay any more than they're paying right now. This is a good investment. It's a solid investment. It's a sound investment. It will pay back. If this is really going forward, I will uncork a bottle of champagne. We need it so desperately."

The study was presented to Tory MLAs late last week. Insiders say it has provoked vigorous discussion.

A key point of concern is how to ensure money ultimately made it into the pay packets of day-care workers.

The province now gives low-income families money for child care. One scenario sees increasing the money to the program. Another proposal calls for the province to revert to a system of direct subsidies for child-care operators.

Both scenarios provoked the same concern from MLAs -- how to make sure extra funds got to workers responsible for care.

Government sources said questions were raised over issues such as who is ultimately responsible to make sure children are properly cared for, government or parents. A related ideological issue had politicians wondering if the government should head down the path of subsidies.

Full monthly subsidies are \$475 for children up to 18 months old, and \$380 for 19 months to school age. A single parent with one child is eligible for a full subsidy if he or she has a monthly net income of \$1,710 or less. Two parents and a child need a net income of \$1,910 or less to qualify and a two-parent household with a toddler and an infant qualifies if their net monthly income is \$2,010 or below.

The report was sent back for revision to address some of the concerns raised by MLAs.

David Taras, a political scientist at the University of Calgary, said as unappealing as artificially enhanced wages sounds to a Tory government, it likely wouldn't cause much political harm.

"It's the kind of issue where I think there is general support and understanding in society," said Taras. "I don't think the government can

make a political mistake by supporting day cares, though they could be seen as making a mistake in some quarters, if they don't."

-Reprinted from The Edmonton Journal

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