

We must do better for our children^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Outgoing premier Gordon Campbell leaves his successor with a big unfulfilled promise to B.C. families.

His 2008 throne speech pledged a new program for three- and four-year-olds and his television address last month acknowledged that B.C. must do better for young children.

Yet, after a decade of budget cuts and failed policies, B.C. families still struggle daily to find quality, affordable child care while they work or study.

The consequences for children, communities and our economy are disastrous.

It's now up to the next premier to start delivering on that promise.

The Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C. and the Early Childhood Educators of B.C. have some constructive advice on how to succeed.

Our Emerging Plan for an Integrated System of Early Care and Learning builds on what is already well known.

First, families need quality child care and quality child care is early learning.

Unfortunately, B.C.'s child care crisis has gone from bad to worse. Fees are too high, waiting lists too long and early childhood educators' wages are too low.

At the same time, B.C. is implementing full-day kindergarten with no strategy to meet the needs of all families, many of whom need full-day, full-year quality early care and learning for their children.

Here's how our seven point Emerging Plan would help B.C. do a much better job.

1. Create a new home for all early care and learning programs - whether located in schools or the community - in the Ministry of Education.

Education offers a universal, publicly funded, democratically-controlled system with relatively high levels of public support and has a well-respected and fairly-paid workforce. Our plan builds on these strengths without moving young children into academic "readiness" programs.

2. Pass a new Early Care and Learning Act to enshrine the rights of young children and their families to access services that meet their needs.

A new Early Care and Learning Act would guarantee families' access to and meaningful involvement in services for their children and would help build a more equal partnership between the child care and education sectors.

3. Create early care and learning plans developed by local boards of education with stakeholders' involvement.

Democratically elected boards of education would govern all early care and learning services in their communities - whether located in schools or not.

They would work with parents, early childhood educators and local governments to develop early care and learning plans.

These plans would guide the integration of existing group and family child care and preschools into the new system and the development of new services.

4. Build new Early Years Centres, a more appropriate alternative to the needs of young children than part-time pre-kindergarten.

Early Years Centres is a new name for the places where children up to age five could participate in part- or full-day early care and learning programs while their families are at work, school or home.

Early Years Centres would be staffed by qualified early childhood educators. They will become places that communities can and do feel proud of - just like libraries, parks and schools.

5. Move forward with accountability.

Our Emerging Plan builds on the strengths of the school system and existing child care services.

Family child care, group centres and preschools could affiliate into Early Years Centres.

School boards would develop more Early Years Centres to meet unmet needs.

These centres would be funded to meet five accountability measures:

- Cap parent fees at affordable levels.
- Raise early childhood educators' wages and education levels.
- Include all children.
- Meet identified community needs.
- Offer play-based programs that support children's holistic development.

6. Enhance kindergarten and Grade 1.

Children would still begin 'school' at age five but our plan creates a bridge between Early Years Centres and schools by bringing qualified early childhood educators into kindergarten and Grade 1 to work alongside teachers.

7. Support early childhood educators move toward parity with teachers through improved education.

The research is clear -- qualified early childhood educators are the key to quality early care and learning programs.

Our plan calls for a move, over time, to a bachelor's degree in early childhood as a new educational standard for the field.

Our plan is innovative, ambitious and achievable.

It offers a concrete way to build on years of recommendations for action.

B.C. children, families and communities need this plan to be high on the new premier's to-do list.

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