

Funding the future ^[1]

Author: Dallaire, Jody

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EXCERPTS

Walk down the street in any community, and you are likely to find services such as a school, a library, a neighbourhood park, an arena, playing fields, and other recreational facilities - all services that are publicly funded and managed by various levels of government.

Missing from this list of standard must-haves are child care programs. Some communities may have a child care program while others don't. Why is that? Child care programs are not publicly funded. Not in New Brunswick and not in most of Canada.

Don't get me wrong... The situation is better than it was even 10 years ago. The average hourly wage for the workforce has improved significantly, up from \$7 in 2001 to between \$11 and \$14 in 2009. Also, now 19 percent of children between the ages of 0 and 12 have access to a regulated child care space, as compared to 7 percent in 1996.

I believe however that we have maxed out on the progress that can be made in child care- because the fundamentals are not changing. Child care is still seen and managed by governments as a private commodity that parents must purchase, not as a public good worthy of a long term government commitment.

The "private service" mentality is the reason that not all children who need regulated child care have access to it. This is why parental fees continue to increase, currently at about \$600 per month per child. This is also why most of the child care workforce remains untrained and under-paid.

Outside of Quebec, provincial and territorial governments are responsible for child care public policy and public funding. In Canada, currently only a small fraction of the public funding available to child care programs comes from the federal government.

In some provinces, municipalities are taking a leadership role in child care. For example some municipalities in Alberta (Jasper, Beaumont and Drayton Valley) and in Saskatchewan (Vibank, Bengough, Carnduff, and the rural community of Pittville No. 169) provide child care programs that are managed by the municipality.

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I was disappointed in November 2009 when a majority of my colleagues at Dieppe City Council defeated a motion to jointly study these models with the provincial government, with the possibility of a partnership developing as a result of the study. Looking back on it now, I cannot say that I am really surprised.

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Having all levels of government involved in child care makes economic sense. Canadian economist, Robert Fairholm, with the Centre for Spatial Economics, conducted a study on workforce shortages in child care which included an analysis of the estimated economic and social impacts of child care programs.

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In my opinion, the study's most noteworthy finding is that even in the short term, more than 90 percent of the cost of hiring child care workers goes back to governments as increased revenue. A 90 percent rate of return on investment, is pretty good if you ask me.

Given that most of the returns to government are accrued by the federal government, it would make sense for the federal government to take a leadership role in child care. Unfortunately, considering the federal Conservative government's dismal track record on this issue, I am not optimistic for the next four years.

It's too bad, really, because Canada already lags behind the rest of the world on its early learning and child care record. For example, UNICEF evaluated 25 rich countries on 10 early learning and child care benchmarks. Canada failed on 9 out of the 10 benchmarks.

For most of us, achieving a 10 percent mark on a test would push us to do better. Unfortunately, the Canadian government does not seem to be getting the message. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and an organization called Save the Children also place Canada last on the international stage when it comes to early learning and child care.

Although child care is a provincial responsibility (perhaps now with moving the responsibility of child care from the NB Department of Social Development to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development we will also see a move towards a system that is publicly funded and publicly managed) there are reasons to justify the involvement of municipal and federal levels of government.

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