

NDP slows child-care funding increases: Deficit-burdened province asks parents to pay more ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The Selinger government is asking parents to pay more for daycare as it wrestles with a \$1.1-billion budget deficit.

The NDP will increase funding to child-care centres by one percent per year for two years, one of the lowest increases since the party took power in 1999, Family Services Minister Jennifer Howard said Wednesday.

"It's not a secret we're looking at increasingly uncertain economic times, but child care is important," Howard said. "We'll still be providing the lion's share of funding increases for child care, but we're going to look to increase their contribution."

The higher fees and funding increase will raise about \$17 million during the next two years to cover the operating costs of regulated child-care and home-based centres, she said.

Fees for parents of infants and preschool children will go up by \$1 a day and fees for parents of school-age children will go up by 35 cents a day. The new fees take effect July 1 and will go up again by the same amounts July 1, 2013. Fees have remained generally stable since 2001.

"It's a partnership between government and parents and we both need to invest a little bit more in child care," Howard said.

More details of the child-care funding plan are to be released today.

Howard said despite the parent fee increases, Manitoba will have the second-lowest daycare costs in the country after Quebec, where child care costs \$7 a day for allocated spaces. Daily fees in Manitoba are \$28 for infants, \$18.80 for preschool children, \$9.60 for school-age children with lunch and \$8 for school-age kids without a lunch.

"It's important to us that child care is still affordable to parents," Howard said. "But the reality is that our funding has increased tremendously over the last decade and parental fees have remained flat."

Pat Wege, executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association, said the new fees and government funding will bring increased stability to the system.

"I'll give them a thumbs-up on this one," Wege said, adding low-income parents will be protected under the funding scheme. "The province is definitely seeing a need to expand and enhance the service, and this is a very good step."

Howard said the province will also increase funding for subsidized spaces by \$800,000 so low-income families won't feel the pinch of higher fees and more families are eligible for a subsidized space.

She added its up to each daycare to determine what it will charge (the province only sets maximum fees), but it's believed all centres will charge the maximum. Centres that do not receive any government funding are free to set their own rates.

The province will also spend about \$9 million during the next year to add 900 more child-care spaces to the system, which now has room for about 30,000 children. The province had said it would provide new funding for 6,500 quality child-care spaces by the end of 2013.

The funding and fee increases will partly go toward pay raises for child-care workers, Howard said. The province had pledged three years ago that wages for child-care workers would go up about 20 per cent over five years. With two years remaining, there is seven per cent left to go. The province and the industry are looking at a standardized wage scale for child-care workers as a way to keep people in the field.

"It's very similar to opening hospital beds," Howard said. "You can't open a bed if you don't have a nurse. You can't open a childcare space if you don't have somebody there to take care of the child."

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