

Daycare fees need a refocus ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Pleading poverty, the provincial government has announced it will expect parents to pay a bit more of the bill for child care. Daycare fees this year, and again next year, will be allowed to rise between 35 cents and \$1 a day, depending on the age of the child. At that, the provincial government's subsidies and grants for daycare centres outstrip the amount parents pay toward the cost of watching their children.

Manitoba parents have not seen their daycare fees rise in more than a decade. While child-care centres can charge up to an additional \$3 per day, the maximum fees have been sitting at \$28 for infants, and less than \$10 a day for school-aged kids, since 2001. In that time, the provincial family services department has doubled its spending on financial assistance and grants for daycare centres and the more than 27,000 publicly supported spaces they provide to parents for children younger than 13. About one-third of those spots receive additional subsidies for low-income families, whose children many studies have shown are most in need of tailored, enriched early learning to better their chances in school and life.

Family Services Minister Jennifer Howard stressed the hike to parent fees was brought on due to the provincial government's own financial need, but kept in mind the goal of keeping Manitoba's fees Canada's second lowest. As principles go, that's a strange public-policy goal.

Over the decade, the parent fee, as a percentage of daycare cost, has fallen substantially. The meagre increase now is a sign the NDP has not kept close watch on program efficiency and has squandered precious opportunities to spend where need is greatest. The fully subsidized rate requires those parents of lowest income pay only \$2 a day, a commendable sign the government recognizes children who would benefit most get the most assistance. But parent fees, generally, cover only 43 per cent of the cost for keeping an infant and 58 per cent of cost of preschool children in daycare, which take the vast bulk of the daycare spaces available.

Those of higher incomes should pay more of the cost for their children's care. That would free up more departmental revenue to serve kids at greatest risk of starting school so far behind their peers they face enormous hurdles to succeed. Ms. Howard needs to refocus on the goals of Manitoba's child-care programs.

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