

Canadian childcare in crisis ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

After finding out that May is National Childcare Month, I thought I'd do a nice little piece on the fact that Thompson Rivers University (TRU) has its own on-campus childcare facility devoted to both university students and staff, how student-parents can (and should) take advantage of the day care and how much its very existence benefits the campus community as a whole.

While all of this is undoubtedly true, I found that the story simply would not be sated with such a cursory examination of the subject — at least as far as how it relates to the topic of National Childcare Month. Many people had strong opinions on the subject — most of which were extremely negative illustrations about the current state of childcare in this country — so I went deeper to explore what was causing all the emotion behind this heated topic.

I knew going in that I personally pay a large percentage of my family's income to have my child in a day care facility, but he enjoys it, he gains social skills, he learns something new seemingly every day he's there, and really, I just chalked it up to, "That's what you have to do. It's not like we can afford to have one of us staying home with him."

I didn't realize that the situation was far more complicated than just the out-of-pocket expense incurred by parents, and I decided that National Childcare Month is the perfect time to examine what the current state of childcare is in Canada, what we can do to improve that situation and who is working on doing just that.

Is there a "crisis" in Canadian childcare?

In a 2008 UNICEF report, Canada tied for last place among 25 developed countries on early childcare services. The report — in which Canada failed to meet nine of the ten benchmarks — seems to lend support to the idea that we, as many say, are in a childcare "crisis" in Canada. The only standard that Canada met in the UNICEF study was the benchmark acknowledging that 50 per cent of staff in accredited early education services have obtained post-secondary qualifications.

The Canadian Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CCRRU), whose mandate is "to collect, organize and synthesize early childhood education and child care information resources and to make them widely available," also released a report in 2008, where they found that there were only regulated — meaning licensed — childcare spaces for 18.6 per cent of 0-12 year-olds in Canada, and only 20.3 per cent of 0-5 year olds.

This means that 79.7 per cent of children under the age of six did not have a licensed space available. According to that same study, the growth in the total number of childcare spaces available had gone down from 50,831 per year (average) between 2001-2004 to only 29,791 in 2007-2008.

While these statistics alone would indicate a major problem, the main reason that many consider Canada to be in a childcare “crisis” is the lack of a publicly funded and delivered system for childcare — one of the main benchmarks Canada failed to meet that was highlighted in the UNICEF study.

“Crisis, I think, is the correct way to characterize where Canada is at,” admitted Darcie Beggs, senior equality officer with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

According to Beggs, CUPE represents about 9000 childcare workers across the country, and “has long worked hard in coalition with other unions, childcare activists, etcetera to ensure that Canada has a national childcare program that is publicly funded and delivered.”

Unfortunately, she said, their pleas to the government have largely fallen on deaf ears over the past few years.

“The federal government has basically abandoned childcare issues,” she said. “When this government came to power, one of the first things they did was to quash the deal that was made between the provinces and the then federal Liberal government to actually introduce a childcare program,” which she said is the main cause of the “crisis” in Canadian childcare.

Because of the lack of federal funding and policy, according to Beggs, “[childcare has] now become a market-based approach rather than, if you will, a system-based approach to delivering childcare. Because there isn’t enough quality childcare where there are trained workers who have decent wages and benefits and are actually trained early childhood educators, people have to use their own resources to try to find care for their kids rather than there being a system for ensuring that there is quality care in our communities.”

She added that the result of a lack of public funding and delivery is that for-profit centres are growing to compensate for a market that has too few public, non-profit facilities.

CUPE’s desire for a publicly funded and delivered system for childcare has caused CUPE to throw their support behind The Community Plan for a Public System of Integrated Early Care & Learning — or as it is commonly known in the British Columbia childcare community, simply “The Plan.”

“The Plan”

“The Plan” is a proposal that has been put forward by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC (CCCABC) and the Early Childhood Educators of BC that they claim would ease, if not resolve, the current childcare “crisis.”

“‘The Plan’ combines the best of public education with the best of childcare,” according to Sharon Gregson, long time childcare advocate and CCCABC spokesperson, as well as easing the financial burden on families by putting a cap on parent fees at \$10 per day and see families earning less than \$40,000 per year incur no user fees whatsoever.

“Just as children have a right to go to school, they have the right to access high quality child care. Child care should not just be for parents who are wealthy or lucky,” she said.

Gregson pointed out some similarities between “The Plan” and Québec’s public childcare system, which has a \$7 user fee.

Despite the price being right for parents however, a lack of accessibility to the public facilities in that province — due in large part to the number of people going after those \$7 per day price tag services — creates other significant problems.

McGill University’s on-campus day care centre, known officially as the Centre de la Petite Enfance de McGill, for example, serves 106

children of McGill students, staff, and faculty, but there are close to 800 children on the waiting list — a list that sees parents waiting about three years for an available space.

Because the centre is government-subsidized, those fortunate enough to have a space pay just \$7 a day, which is likely why the wait-list is so long. Private daycares in Montreal can cost from around \$45 per day to upwards of \$60.

The other government-subsidized facility reserved for the McGill community — the SSMU (McGill's Student Society) Daycare — has spots for eight infants (0 to 18 months) and 32 children (18 to 60 months). Their waitlist is over 350.

According to Annie Shiel, a reporter for The McGill Daily, many student-parents turn to nannies or non-government-subsidized childcare facilities (some of which are unlicensed and operate out of private residences) because they just can't wait for a spot to open somewhere for them.

When you compare those numbers to the current “spaces available versus waitlist length” situation in B.C., you start to think that it is a bit of give-and-take as far as the non-subsidized system is concerned.

Sure it costs more than \$7 per day, but far less than \$45 to \$60 — even before you take into account the \$100 monthly cheque families outside Québec receive from the government (per child) to help with childcare, with low-income families qualifying for more assistance once registered in a facility — and I couldn't find anyone out west who sat on a childcare waitlist for three years, either.

The TRU childcare waitlist, for example, is currently hovering in the 200 per cent of spaces available range, according to Marian Hardy, executive director of the Cariboo Childcare Society, the non-profit organization that operates the TRU childcare facilities.

That's a far cry from the 700-plus per cent range seen in many places in Québec. Hardy said TRU student-parents can “realistically expect to wait 12 to 18 months,” which is less than half of the expected wait-time at McGill.

The University of British Columbia (UBC), the largest childcare provider of any North American post-secondary institution, has recently added even more spaces for children, and delegated more of its budget to childcare, including \$100,000 per year for ten years (beginning in 2008) from the Capital Projects Acquisition and Construction Fund.

Despite adding spaces and throwing money at the problem, their waitlists haven't gone down — but they haven't gone up, either.

One of the main changes proposed in “The Plan” is that control of childcare would move from the Ministry of Children and Family Development to the Ministry of Education.

This change is a significant one, according to Beggs, “because childcare is also childcare and learning, and we know how important it is for the learning part of childcare to be seen and recognized.”

She thinks that too much public mindset about childcare facilities is that they are basically babysitters where people drop off their kids for the day, and not enough emphasis is placed on them as being places of teaching and early childhood development.

“We're not just providing day care,” Hardy said. She has been in the childcare field for 26 years, and thinks the change is long overdue.

“In an ideal world, every school would have a wing for early childhood education, and it would be appreciated for its value,” she said.

According to Beggs, it is a natural fit for childcare to come under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education.

“We’re used to having the government deliver programs in schools, so it’s a good fit and easy shift to expanding the [education] program to include the early learning and care centres as well.”

She also thinks the shift makes sense both in terms of changing the mindset, as well as logistically.

“The facilities are already there,” she said. “The infrastructure is in place to house a quality centre, and it’s partly the strategic shift to think about it not just as day care, it’s not babysitting, but it’s really learning and care and the services can be delivered by qualified early childhood educators.”

Hardy agrees, but admitted that “trying to get everyone to the table is the problem,” in terms of changing the mindset en masse.

- reprinted from *The Omega*

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