

Childcare progress at risk in Manitoba: Provincial and federal action needed ^[1]

Fast Facts

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As Manitoba enters the last year of the Five Year Plan for childcare, Manitobans can reasonably be wondering: what is the future of childcare in our province?

Total funding increases since the NDP took office in 1999, have been impressive: 107 percent growth in seven years. However in Budget 2006-07, total childcare spending increased by just 1.9%, barely the cost of inflation. Last year's childcare budget was \$103 million; this year, it is \$105 million. Overall budget growth in the past few years has been fueled by federal transfers dedicated to childcare. A full 33% percent of the 2005-06 childcare budget came from federal dollars, a sign of how important Ottawa's decisions are to Manitoba's childcare system.

Manitoba has made significant improvements in childcare since 1999 a new operating funding system has been introduced, grant increases have allowed eroded early childhood educator wages to rise, and a recruitment and retention program has brought new people into the childcare field.

Overall the province has signaled its enthusiasm for childcare. In 2001, a major public consultation saw more than 24,000 Manitobans call for a "new vision" for childcare. In April 2002, the province rolled out a "Five Year Plan" for childcare. Manitoba has played a valuable national role in advancing childcare at the pan-Canadian level. Under successive Ministers of Family Services and Housing, Manitoba has played a leadership role in promoting a national childcare system. With the federal government, the province co-sponsored the Third National Childcare Conference, held in Winnipeg in 2004. Manitoba was the first province to sign a bilateral agreement, and the first province to specify an action plan for how the new funds will be spent. Based on its own early plans, and accelerated in anticipation of forthcoming federal funds, Manitoba has announced a series of initiatives – wage increases to early childhood educators, new capital for renovations/expansion, plans to extend operating funding to currently unfunded facilities, reforms of the part-day nursery program, and review of the subsidy system.

However, for all the recent progress and ambitious plans, childcare services are still expensive and scarce. Today, there are less than 26,000 licensed full and part day spaces for a province with 179,000 children under the age of 12. In many parts of the province, there are long waiting lists. A recent survey by the Child Care Coalition of Manitoba discovered there were more names on Winnipeg childcare centre lists (almost 15,000) than there were children in centres (about 14,000). Parents must pay for childcare unless their incomes are well below the poverty line, and even then they are surcharged. The pay of most early childhood educators is still too low, and the field needs to attract, train and retain significant numbers of new workers. Quality, inclusiveness, and accessibility need to be improved.

Much work remains to be done to build our province's childcare system. And the task may get harder, since Manitoba stands to lose \$126 million over the next three years if Prime Minister Harper's cancellation of the childcare agreements is not turned back.

As we consider the future of childcare, we should continue to make two important points. First, Manitoba can and should vigorously pursue the childcare funding committed by the federal government. The province signed an agreement in good faith with the government of Canada, not, as some have asserted, with a Liberal government. Manitoba should not be too quick to assume Prime Minister Harper cannot be persuaded to continue the agreements.

By defending the childcare agreements, Manitoba will continue to show national leadership. We must ensure that the nascent national childcare program is not traded off for money, in discussions about fiscal imbalance or equalization. A national childcare program is more than cash – and the agreements, with their dedicated terms and conditions, are a good first step.

Second, let's not underestimate the capacity of the province to keep its own commitments. After all, Manitoba's Five Year Plan was launched in 2002, well before the 2005 childcare agreements were a gleam in anyone's eye. Parents will be expecting Manitoba to carry out its action plan even if Mr. Harper prevails and the federal funds end on April 1, 2007. Quebec's publicly-funded childcare program, for example, was rolled out well before federal funds were available.

The provincial government should publicly promise to maintain all the commitments made in the Five Year Plan and its successor Action Plan. This will take standing up to Ottawa for the dedicated funds or making up the difference if the federal funds are indeed lost.

While Budget 2006 rightfully promised to "champion" the Kelowna Accord, it didn't offer the same clarion call for childcare. The childcare budget barely held pace with inflation. Several already-announced provincial initiatives have been frozen indefinitely. Manitobans should be asking how our own government, as well as the federal government, is going to handle the childcare file.

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