

There's no Saskaboom on the childcare front ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Saskatchewan has one of the highest workforce participation rates in Canada among women with children five years of age and younger, but at the moment our province simply does not have enough childcare spaces to meet the demand of a growing population of working parents.

With the escalating costs of buying a home and trying to make ends meet, mothers of young children are in the paid labour force like never before. Unfortunately, our province has a sad record of investing in childcare, regardless of the political party in office.

Saskatchewan may be No. 1 or 2 in Canada in job growth, weekly earnings and retail sales and it may have a low number of employment insurance claimants, etc., but it has the dubious distinction of being last in Canada when it comes to the number of licensed childcare spaces.

In fact, a recent report shows that only 11.5 per cent of children in Saskatchewan younger than age five have access to licensed childcare. Alberta is second last, at 19.9 per cent.

The most recent Saskatchewan budget announced the addition of 500 new childcare spaces in 15 communities. Education Minister Russ Marchuk stated in May that, "As a result, more families across the province will have access to childcare that will in turn help them take advantage of the opportunities as a result of our growing economy."

At the time, he said that with this year's investment, Saskatchewan now has 13,700 high-quality licensed childcare spaces, an increase of 4,435 since 2007. The problem for families is that only 10,752 of those spaces actually are in operation, while 3,000 spaces remain undeveloped.

Combined with the province having the lowest number of licensed spaces in Canada, it's no wonder parents are scrambling to find suitable childcare. Parents who can't get their children into licensed care have to resort to using unlicensed operations, and as a recent CBC story pointed out, the quality of some of these leaves parents at work worried about their children.

In fact, one Saskatoon parent reportedly posted an ad on Kijiji that warned other parents about a 24-hour unlicensed operator, suggesting that when her child got home he was thirsty and hungry. Worse was her suspicion that her toddler may have been subdued with Tylenol.

The government can issue yearly press releases to tout its creation of new child care spaces. However, it also needs to ensure that the administration has the capacity, which means enough people with the know-how to get those spaces open, so that working parents can use them.

Qualified licensed care today means facilities that have staff members with diplomas in early childhood education. Recent information suggests that the average hourly wage for workers in licensed childcare centres is \$14.92 an hour.

The province needs to consider if one of the reasons it has been unable to open many of those 3,000 spaces is the inadequacy of remuneration for childcare program staff, particularly in communities where the cost of living is high. When labour shortages in some sectors have had an impact on delivering public services, the government has addressed the situation by improving wages.

The reality in our province is that most parents with small children are in the paid labour force. In the past, many parents relied upon family to fill the gaps in childcare while they were at work. This option is long gone, as more and more boomers are delaying their retirement.

For the past two decades, various provincial governments have focused a lot of their efforts on policies to promote economic growth. That work is finally paying off, with the population increasing, communities growing, and new businesses coming on stream as others expand.

There's no doubt that Saskatchewan is on an economic roll. To sustain that growth, our province must now turn its attention to putting in place supports for Saskatchewan's young parents and their children, including expanding the number of licensed care spaces.

-reprinted from the StarPhoenix

Region: Saskatchewan ^[2]

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/09/theres-no-saskaboom-childcare-front> [2]
<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7858>