

Child care: Future of Nova Scotia's children at stake ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Nova Scotia is going to the polls. What does this mean for families with children under the age of five?

Since 2005, the province of Nova Scotia has put emphasis and value on the early years as it acknowledges the care and education of our youngest children is important to society and critical to our province's future economic development. The province has reviewed and improved areas such as subsidy and centre funding, licensing regulations, program practices and staff training for early learning centres.

Responsibility for early childhood has been moved to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. That means the department can now focus on the education and care of children under five.

The expanded department is working on a framework and system of early learning and care that aims to be comprehensive and meet the needs of Nova Scotia's families and communities.

Most importantly, it has to be a system that's accessible, affordable and pays child care workers a fair wage.

Currently, Nova Scotia has the lowest paid early childhood educators in all of Canada. The average wage is less than \$13 an hour and retention is low. People are leaving for better paying jobs elsewhere. Some go from child care to retail or bartending because they can make more in tips than they can in the classroom.

Today, most mothers of young children are in the labour force or in education and training. Low-income families receiving a child care subsidy still cannot afford the fees charged by child care facilities. Those on income assistance receive an additional subsidy, but it's capped at \$400 a month. That's enough to cover the cost of one child in daycare but not enough to cover the cost of two or more.

The only way to get out of poverty is through employment or education and without affordable child care, neither is possible. Child care facilities are aware of the economic situations but can't raise their fees to pay their staff what they are worth because families simply can't afford the increase.

System needs immediate attention

Nova Scotia early learning and child care needs immediate attention. High quality early years experiences are well-recognized as key building blocks for lifelong learning and improved education outcomes for children. Both these drivers affect not only individual families but Nova Scotia's current and future economic prosperity and place in Canada.

Nova Scotia needs to be innovative and committed as we move ahead of other provinces and create a real system of early childhood education and child care that meets the needs of society while providing the economic stimulus that the province can benefit from. We need to continue with a Child Care Act that guarantees standards and the principles of quality, universality, accessibility, developmental programming and inclusiveness.

The province of Nova Scotia can create a system that's affordable and accessible without financial strain on taxpayers. The early years branch is looking at how the government funds all programs for our youngest citizens to strategize, become more comprehensive and eliminate the duplication of services, thus saving money.

Also, there's evidence that investing more dollars in child care can increase government revenue. In November 2012, a TD Economics report showed that every dollar invested in child care provides an economic return of \$1.49 up to \$17.00.

Unique provincial investment

That's because a quality early learning and care program immediately increases the number of parents in the workforce and reduces the number of at-risk children entering the public school system. It ensures higher success throughout elementary, middle and high school, therefore reducing the need for educational assistants. It translates into a lower number of high school drop-outs, a higher number of students going on to post-secondary school and fewer young people in the juvenile justice system.

This guarantees a future with a stronger economy and more tax revenue in all areas. No other provincial investment can guarantee these same returns.

A comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approach to an early learning and care system is realistic and a goal that can be accomplished in the near future.

With the upcoming election, the NSCCA wants to ensure that whichever political party is elected or re-elected continues on with all that has been put into place and ensures that Nova Scotia's children under five have someone looking out for them and their best interests.

There is nothing less than the future of Nova Scotia's children at stake.

As candidates canvas for votes, be sure to discuss their stand on children from birth to five and ask if they see Nova Scotia's youngest citizens as an integral part of a sound economic future for our province.

Kathleen Couture has worked in child care for 25 years. She is the chair of the Nova Scotia Child Care Association.

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