

NDP proposes \$15-a-day national child-care program ^[1]

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie & Campion-Smith, Bruce

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The New Democrats have put child care back on the national agenda with their plan to create one million \$15-a-day spaces across the country within eight years, say parents, advocates and Queens Park.

"Our government welcomes and encourages a national discussion and interest from all federal parties on child care," said Ontario Education Minister Liz Sandals.

"For too long that interest has been absent, particularly from the Harper Conservative government," she said in an email, referring to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's refusal to discuss a national plan.

"We look forward to reviewing the federal NDP proposal in detail," she added.

NDP Leader Tom Mulcair rolled out his party's national plan at a downtown Ottawa child-care centre Tuesday morning, vowing that affordable daycare is "just one election away."

By 2018-19, New Democrats say their program, to be implemented in partnership with the provinces, would fund 370,000 child-care spaces at a federal cost of \$1.87 billion.

The annual cost to create or maintain one million affordable spaces would rise to more than \$5 billion by 2023 when the plan is fully implemented, according to NDP background documents.

Toronto mother Cynthia Siggins, 30, called Mulcair's campaign-style announcement "pretty amazing."

"Whether it actually comes to fruition or not, at least somebody in Ottawa is talking about this," said the elementary school teacher, who teaches in York Region. Siggins had to delay her return to work last winter by several months because she couldn't find child care for baby Madeline, now 20 months old.

She and her husband, Josh Shultz, who rent a two-bedroom apartment in East York, say monthly daycare costs of almost \$1,000 mean buying a house isn't in their budget - especially if they want to have a second child.

Toronto parents can pay up to \$2,000 a month for child care with average costs eating up more than 18 per cent of average Canadian family income.

There are licensed child-care spaces for just 22.5 per cent of Canadian children under age 5 at a time when more than 73 per cent of young mothers are working.

Larissa Barr, 40, who has voted Liberal in the past, said Mulcair's plan will "definitely" prompt her to consider voting NDP in the next election.

She and her husband Sai Leung pay \$1,800 a month in daycare fees for their 20-month-old baby Lucas and are feeling "quite stretched financially."

"Every parent I know talks about this," said Barr, who is expecting her second child early next year. "It's time it became a broader discussion."

Don Giesbrecht of the Canadian Child Care Federation, a national professional organization for the child-care sector, said he was "thankful" a federal party is making the case for more spaces.

"No province is going to be able to move their provincial systems forward without an infusion of money, leadership and accountability at the federal level and that is what is being proposed here," he said in an interview from Winnipeg.

"A lot of governments have promised child care spaces, but I don't think I've seen (a plan) as ambitious and as quantifiable as this. And so we'll see what the other parties have to say."

Inspired by Quebec's \$7-a-day child-care program, Mulcair says he wants to make affordable, high quality daycare available nationwide.

"Too many children simply have no access at all to quality child care, which is, we believe, the foundation for early learning," Mulcair told reporters.

Women often suffer the most from the lack of daycare spaces, which stands as a barrier to getting back into the workforce, he said.

"Women, first and foremost, pay the price of not having affordable child care available to them. They have to make the sacrifices on the career far more than men do," he added.

Mulcair cited research by economist Pierre Fortin that shows child-care funding "pays for itself" by increasing participation in the workforce, meaning ultimately more tax revenues for government.

"In other words, affordable child care is as good for the economy as it is for families," Mulcair said.

Under the NDP plan, provinces would be on the hook for 40 per cent of the program's costs. But Mulcair said some provinces like Ontario, which has two years of full-day kindergarten, are already spending heavily in early childhood education and care.

"We're not saying that it's one size fits all," Mulcair said. The goal at the end of the first mandate would be to have the "vast majority" of provinces signed on to the program, he added.

The child-care pledge is a key plank in the NDP's platform for the next federal election, scheduled to be fought in October 2015.

Mulcair said the Liberals "talked about it for 13 years but didn't create a single space."

But Liberal MP Rodger Cuzner called Mulcair "delusional," noting that his party had plans for a national daycare program that were scuttled when the New Democrats sided with the Conservatives to defeat Prime Minister Paul Martin's minority government in 2005.

The Conservatives won the election that followed and Prime Minister Stephen Harper scrapped the Liberal program and replaced it with a \$100 monthly payout for parents with young children.

"It was shot down by the incoming government but the NDP had their fingerprints all over the gun. That's the sad reality," said Cuzner (Cape Breton-Canso) in an interview. The wild card in Mulcair's plan is whether the provinces will come onside, a job that took the Liberals a year of negotiations, he noted.

Toronto Child care expert Martha Friendly is also concerned about provincial cost-sharing, noting provinces have balked in the past.

"But it is a far-reaching program with a lot of money in it . . . and a well-defined affordability bar that is flexible, which is really quite clever," she said. "This is much more than a good first step."

Region: Canada ^[3]

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