

Universal child care must be a priority ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

The perception that early childhood educators are little more than babysitters is, in our opinion, completely wrong.

After parents drop their children off at the friendly neighbourhood daycare centre, early childhood educators (ECEs) do not spend the day talking to their boyfriends on the phone and doing their nails, while little Johnny and little Joanie sit in front of a TV.

ECEs are, first and foremost, educators. Teachers. And while teachers' unions might not want to hear or accept this, we feel it is an undeniable fact.

Because they spend more time with Canada's youngest citizens than their parents do, we've tasked ECEs with introducing our children to fundamental concepts like literacy, numeracy, science, art, hygiene and socialization.

But more importantly, ECEs introduce children to education itself, setting the stage for how kids approach learning. Outstanding childcare has the potential to instill a lifelong love of it; poor childcare can do the opposite.

Most of the important things we learn in life, we learn before the age of five, and most children today are learning those concepts in a daycare centre.

And yet, among the countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Canada ranks fifth from the bottom in childcare spending as a percentage of GDP. We pay more for daycare than we do university, yet ECEs are paid a pittance and often don't receive benefits.

It makes absolutely no sense.

Canada is a nation of workers. Three-quarters of women are in the workforce and even more men. But to allow that, two-parent families are paying nearly \$3,000 a month on average for childcare. This keeps many women out of the workforce - which means less taxable income - and less disposable income for families, which means lower revenues from sales taxes.

Canada spends half the OECD average on childcare and one third of the recommended minimum one per cent of GDP for children up to age five, according to a study from the Centre for Policy Alternatives. This despite studies that show for every extra government dollar spent on childcare, the GDP gets a boost of between \$1.75 and \$2.30, and even more over the long term.

This is a bigger boost than stimulus spending on manufacturing.

Canada's market-driven approach to regulated childcare leaves parents scrambling for limited daycare spaces, while paying a premium for the privilege (and often settling for substandard, unregulated care, with little to no education component).

It leaves many Aboriginal children and children from lower-income families out entirely, which denies the kids a valuable introduction to education and limits their parents' job opportunities.

Quebec's \$7-a-day childcare model is nearly as revered in La belle province as the national health-care system. But Quebec is finding the \$2.3 billion it spends on its one-size-fits-all program is becoming too expensive - because everyone wants it.

So perhaps that model isn't best. But that doesn't mean there's a problem with universal childcare; it means there's a problem with the model, a problem with delivery, not concept. It's not an insurmountable challenge.

NDP Leader Tom Mulcair says a national \$15-a-day daycare plan, modeled off Quebec's, would pay for itself. Given Quebec's experience, it looks like he might be wrong about that. Even if he is, we believe when it comes to early childhood education, the value for money is there.

And perhaps Mulcair's plan doesn't go far enough. Perhaps it's time to move from a market-driven system based on demand (which isn't

cutting the mustard anyway) to one that acknowledges what we all know: Education is not just a right - it's a necessity. And yet governments are not taking it seriously.

Taking it seriously could mean rolling daycare right into the education systems of every province, so all children can get the educational benefits; so parents can keep more of their money; so ECEs can be paid a wage closer to the value of their job; so our GDP can benefit.

The value of a good education can't be understated.

Have we learned nothing?

-reprinted from Northern Life

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