

Tangible steps for Canadian childcare policy ^[1]

Blog

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McGrane's top priorities for early childhood education and care in Canada

1) Universal Pre-K Programs for Four Year-olds. The most promising way to make progress on childcare in Canada is to integrate it with the public school system. It has to become a public good, like education for children aged 5 to 18. Similar to how the federal government led the creation of Medicare in the 1960s, it must now encourage the expansion of the public school system to become inclusive of four year olds. Where this had been applied (like Ontario's implementation with "junior kindergarten" programs), we are seeing positive results, particularly for children of low-income families.

2) Subsidize not-for-profit childcare centres to lower their fees, increase spaces, and provide after-hours care. For the foreseeable future, Canada's network of not-for-profit childcare centres that are parent-controlled and founded by community-based organizations will continue to play an important role in providing care for 0-3 year-olds. While they still allow for-profit care, Quebec's network of centres de la petite enfance and PEI's early years centres could serve as models. In these provinces, regulated childcare centres are mandated to keep fees at a standard rate set by the government in exchange for receiving public subsidies. I would envision a similar system where only not-for-profit centres could qualify for a generous subsidy program. Subsidies would be paid directly to the centres themselves and be targeted to improve affordability, encourage the creation of new spaces (particularly for infants), and then increase the provision of after-hours care. After-hours care is an important piece because low-income parents, especially single mothers, are more likely to have jobs with irregular hours. Providing subsidies only to not-for-profit centres and funneling four year olds into the public system would help reduce the number of for-profit childcare providers in Canada. Since for-profit childcare has been proven to be more expensive and lower quality, this would be a good thing.

3) Transform childcare workers into childcare professionals. High school and elementary school teachers are considered professionals with four-year university degrees, regulatory bodies, and unions to protect their interests. Conversely, in many Canadian childcare centres, childcare workers have little or no training and, subsequently, are not paid that much. We need to have four-year degrees in early childhood education at universities around the country. Regulatory bodies and childcare provider unions should be set up in every province to allow for the establishment of professional standards and collective bargaining for those employed in the sector. These changes would necessitate a public program of wage enhancements to ensure that childcare centres could pay their employees salaries that commensurate with their qualifications and the gap between the salaries of elementary school teachers and childcare professionals would be gradually eliminated.

4) Fathers-only parental leave. The three priorities above concentrate on care in regulated childcare centres, but what about the childcare and education that happens at home? For the first two years of child's life particularly, governments should give support for parents who provide early childhood education to their own children. Dutch economist Heleen Mees suggests that achieving women's full equality in society depends on men taking over a larger share of caring for their children. She argues that the present situation, in which women take almost all state-sponsored parental leave, entrenches women's position as primary caregivers in their families. The result is that women are more likely to work part-time or put their career ambitions on hold for family reasons after parental leave than men. Further, a recent study found that fathers who take parental leave are more involved in children's lives afterward and children with highly involved fathers have better cognitive test scores. To address this, Quebec has developed a program allowing for five weeks of parental leave to be used only by fathers. I conceive of father-designated parental leave as being addition to existing maternity leave; it could also be taken anytime during the first two years of the child's life. In this way, we can use childcare policy to foster greater gender equality in society, as well as helping our children's development.

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