

National plan needed to fix daycare plight ^[1]

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Source: Brandon Sun

Format: Article

Publication Date: 9 Apr 2015

EXCERPTS

If the subject of finding suitable daycare spots for parents of young children has not already become an election issue in this country, it certainly should.

Earlier this week, we had a peek at the lives of some 50 parents who waited outside the Brandon YMCA in the early morning hours of Easter Monday while trying to find in-school daycare spots.

Some, like Alecia McLeod, got in line at 3:30 a.m. just to get a waiting-list spot in the YMCA-run before-and-after-school daycare program at École Harrison School, for her six-year-old daughter.

"I waited in line to get her a spot in a program that's already full," she told the Sun. "That's kind of pathetic."

Still others had been waiting there since 11 p.m. the night before.

The scene outside the YMCA underscores the fact that good-quality daycare in this city is extremely hard to come by. Apparently the situation has become so bad McLeod has been deterred from expanding her family.

"We're so far behind," McLeod told the Sun. "For me personally, it's been a deterrent from having more children because I can't wait in line, I don't want the stress of trying to find a daycare."

No doubt there must be others thinking along these lines. And it's not just Brandon. A spokeswoman for the Manitoba Child Care Association said overnight lineups aren't uncommon in Manitoba.

As we reported Tuesday, the provincial government announced plans back in May 2013 to fund 1,000 new daycare spots in 12 months. Since then, waiting lists have grown ever longer. In April 2014, the number of those waiting for daycare in Westman was 683. In September 2014, that number climbed to 783.

Along with the lack of space, there's also a lack of early childhood educators to run certified daycare facilities. Without new and better investment from either the province or the federal government - specifically to create new spaces and train new educators - this problem seems destined to worsen.

With the Manitoba NDP government running massive deficits and incurring an ever-larger debt load, Manitobans shouldn't expect the answers to come out of Winnipeg. Even the provincial child care registry that was launched in 2011 has become an ineffective joke.

The situation in Manitoba certainly lends to the argument in favour of creating a national daycare program as a means to ease the burden on working parents. But it's not something that will be easily entertained by the governing Conservative party.

As part of the Tories' 2006 election campaign, Stephen Harper proposed a universal child care benefit as an alternative to Liberal prime minister Paul Martin's national daycare proposal - a plan that Conservatives implemented following their victory.

And with only months to go before another federal election, the prime minister has moved forward with a plan to boost the universal child care benefit, from \$100 to \$160 a month per child up to age six, and introduced a credit of \$60 per month for children aged six to 17.

This is in conjunction with a rightly maligned income-splitting plan to save parents of children under 18 years old up to \$2,000 - one that will only benefit a small percentage of Canadian families. Cash payments still do nothing to cover daycare fees in this province - let alone any other - and income splitting benefits families with two parents who have significantly different incomes. This is not a replacement for a national daycare strategy.

Opposition parties, such as the NDP and Liberals, have proposed variations on a national daycare plan, ones that may or may not get rid of the universal child benefit. But it's an uphill battle for these parties to argue against cash in hand for parents.

Nevertheless, now is the time for Canadians to take a hard look at the reality of child care in this country, and to what could be possible under a national daycare plan.

Clearly the status quo is not working well.

Region: Manitoba ^[2]

Tags: election ^[3]

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