

Manitoba universities need more early learning, child-care options ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

Another year of the back-to-school mixture of excitement and anxiety is just around the corner, and some college and university students may already be faced with more anxiety than excitement if quality child care for their children isn't ensured.

Current trends in post-secondary education are leading to a higher number of students needing early learning and child care (ELCC). There are more newcomer and indigenous students with children, and more people with families facing work-force changes are pursuing studies for new careers.

A lack of child care is a huge barrier to overcome, involving short and long-term costs that impact career-entry and duration.

Students must often rely on unregulated child care, despite higher costs and lesser quality. In fact, they can incur more debt paying for child care than they do paying for their own studies.

Subsidize it

But subsidized child care could greatly alleviate these costs. Beyond financial implications, an onsite centre would also help meet the challenge of raising a family while studying. Onsite child care allows parents the flexibility to spend more time with their children, which promotes a better and more balanced study/family approach.

Systemic obstacles for providing ELCC exist in Manitoba, as these centres mainly operate as not-for-profit organizations that receive some public funding. This model of delivery lacks the proper infrastructure and supports to operate, relying heavily on volunteers who often become discouraged by having to fundraise for capital and operational costs.

Students and staff who try to start up a centre on their own face numerous roadblocks. The continuous turnover in the student population and in student associations can lead to loss of momentum and dedication to the project.

The Université de Saint-Boniface is the only public post-secondary institution in Manitoba without an ELCC centre, even though its Early Childhood Education diploma program has existed since 1989. The university is therefore unable to provide child care for these students who would be entering the field and helping to address the shortage of early childhood educators in the province.

There is also the disconcerting risk of language loss for these francophone families with young children in a crucial language development window, as children could be enrolled in an English rather than French language centre.

In 2007, the Université de Saint-Boniface submitted a plan for expansion, including an ELCC lab. The request was denied at the federal level and the expansion was pursued without the ELCC component.

Since then, there has been a feasibility study demonstrating a clear need. A committee was formed to plan for a centre, and the student association set aside funding to support the project. However, the request sent in to the province this year for capital funds has been refused, and the institution is once again stalled in its plans to develop a facility where best practices could be observed, supporting teaching and research.

1 in 36

Other universities and colleges also struggle with ELCC availability to students and staff. At the University of Manitoba, there are 132 licensed spaces meaning there is a space for only one in 36 children, with a waiting list exceeding 700 children. In comparison, the provincial capacity of licensed spaces is measured at approximately one for every five children.

Unfortunately, in post-secondary settings we can observe a certain apathy and even resistance to the concept of having ELCC on campus.

If the need and advantages are obvious for many, some feel it has little consequence for them and are not willing to support efforts in obtaining these services.

It is also a matter of ideology. Some believe child care to be an individual problem rather than a collective responsibility. Furthermore, it tends to be neglected because it impacts women most and is therefore cast aside by decision-makers, many of whom are men in post-secondary institutions.

It would therefore be critical that faculty, staff and students, even those who do not have families of their own, devise a common strategy ensuring funds are prioritized both at provincial and institutional levels for ELCC so that it may be provided in all public post-secondary institutions.

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