

Tories' disappointing plan for child care ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

The Progressive Conservatives were last up on the provincial election campaign to roll out a child-care plan, promising to take immediate steps to tackle the long wait list for access to good child care. That was welcome news, but an analysis of where they would actually spend public funds to do that shows it is unlikely to improve access or quality in the system.

The Conservatives prioritize four key objectives. Given the crisis of spaces and access in the province — at least 12,000 children are waiting for a child-care spot — voters need to know if this \$3.5-million plan will help move child care forward.

Two of the priority items focus on home child-care operators. Currently, just under 10 per cent of the province's approximately 33,500 spaces are in regulated family homes, a share that has steadily been falling the past 15 years; a trend also seen across Canada. The Conservatives propose "simplifying the process" for licensing family homes and increasing the provincial operating grants for which home operators are eligible.

Parents should be aware that "simplifying the process" for licensing family child-care homes may mean lowering the quality standards that protect the health, safety and well-being of children. Today, there are no education or training requirements for home child-care operators beyond a 40-hour course. Today, just 68 out of 430 home child-care operators are certified early childhood educators, but the law allows anyone to open a licensed home provided they complete the short course within 12 months of opening. Parents who are looking for early childhood education and care for their young children should be rightfully concerned that a publicly regulated and partially financed system fails to mandate professional qualifications. If Manitoba is going to rely on an increasing number of family homes to care for our youngest citizens and reduce the licensing standards, it should also ensure that home child-care providers earn a diploma in early childhood education.

The Conservative platform promises to increase the provincial funding for 3,096 family home child-care spaces, but ignores the needs of the 30,465 licensed spaces in child-care centres. The platform doesn't suggest how many new spaces will be created to help address the wait list, but let's assume new family homes might provide 1,200 new spaces, or a modest 10 per cent of the current wait list. If these new spaces receive the proposed new operating grant, the cost will be about \$2.75 million. Extending the increased grant to existing family homes (at a cost of \$1.6 million) will bring the total to \$4.3 million — well over their total budget. Research in British Columbia and Manitoba shows very high rates of turnover in the family home child-care sector: about 50 per cent of homes closed within four years of opening. Increased public investment in an unstable system thus seems fiscally imprudent.

The third plank is to work in partnerships with school divisions to explore "social enterprise initiatives and public-private partnerships." The recent expert-led commission on early learning and child-care recommended school-age child care become the responsibility of school boards. School boards operate on a not-for-profit basis, and it would be unwise to introduce commercial operations into community schools. There are serious questions about the privatization of child care proposed by the Conservative plan.

The fourth and final child care plank is to "enhance scholarships and bursary opportunities" to encourage more Manitobans to train as early childhood educators. Manitoba has a sizable supply of professionally qualified early childhood educators, even though the licensed child care sector suffers from a sufficient number of trained staff. The reason is noncompetitive salaries, which drive qualified professionals away from low-paying child-care positions and into related fields (very often in schools, as valued educational assistants.) The child-care sector was delighted that the recent commission on early learning and child care recommended a provincial wage scale and that the Selinger government agreed. But the PC plan, at just \$3.5 million, cannot even pay for its promises on family homes, let alone tackle other urgent issues.

The Conservative plan does nothing for the 631 child-care centres that currently supply 90 per cent of Manitoba's licensed spaces, and doesn't address the problem of unfair wages for early childhood educators. The plan seems entirely unaware of the new research uncovered by the recent child-care commission, or of its many recommendations. In sum, the Progressive Conservative party platform on

child care falls far short of what is needed to improve either access or quality.

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