

Lenore Zann: Liberals tinker with child care while parents pay \$10,000 ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It seems the Liberals' plan for child care is just more bandages for a broken system. Very few families will benefit from the changes that have been announced.

For weeks now, families and child-care providers across Nova Scotia have been waiting for details of the government's response to the Review of Regulated Child Care. The review found that "the current model of funding child care is not effective or sustainable."

At the Liberal annual general meeting back in April, the premier told Nova Scotians the budget would reflect the value his government places on our children, so you can see why parents and the sector were dreaming big. Unfortunately, this week's announcement failed to live up to those expectations. The government's \$6.6-million investment works out to just \$59 per child — less than the cost of two days of child care. There are also no changes to the current broken funding model.

While we applaud the long overdue recognition of the important work done by early childhood educators, we are not convinced the Liberals' plan will have the desired impact. The Liberals have chosen to set wages at the 2012 Canadian average with no schedule for updating them. It is doubtful the amount of money allocated will actually cover the full cost of increasing staff wages for operators. The grant system proposed will provide more benefit to those centres that have paid the lowest wages and less benefit to the centres whose wages have been closer to the national average. Centres whose staff are paid at or above 2012 levels will not receive any support.

Making child care more accessible to low-income families is also important. However, child-care subsidies are not the way forward. Even with the changes to the subsidy system, there is still a cap on the total amount of subsidies each year — only enough for five per cent of children in the province. This means the Liberals' big plan will affect less than 5,000 families.

The median total family income in the province is about \$70,000 — above the cut-off for subsidies. For a family with an infant and preschooler in full-time child care, the annual cost would be almost 30 per cent of their income. There is nothing in the Liberal government's plan to help this family.

The high cost of child care has meant that many women are forced to make the impossible decision of whether or not they can afford to return to work after having children. Parents in Nova Scotia are the main funders of child care in the province, paying between \$10,000 and \$12,000 for a space. The government contribution, even with this new investment, is still only about \$3,500 per child-care space — far less than government spending for school-aged children.

Investing in child care has a long list of well-documented social and economic benefits. Child care creates jobs. It enables women to have greater participation in the labour market. It boosts GDP and tax revenue, reduces poverty and income inequality, and addresses population decline.

Nova Scotia needs skilled workers and we need to grow the population. Properly designed early childhood education can meet the diverse needs of children, and support parents, especially women, as they work, study, and participate in community life.

If our province is truly interested in taking action to eliminate poverty, addressing women's inequality and supporting healthy children, then we need to stop tinkering with the broken patchwork of grants and subsidies. Now is the time to invest in high-quality, affordable early childhood education in which workers are paid fairly and fees are affordable for all families.

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