

Child Care: Supporting B.C. Children and Families **Investing In Our Future**

B.C. BACKGROUND

On October 21, 1999, the Ministry for Social Development and Economic Security released a discussion paper called “Building a Better Future for British Columbia’s Kids”. This paper recognized that the quality of care we give our children early in their lives is absolutely critical to their success in school and as adults. It also recognized that parents are the primary caregivers for their children and provide the foundation on which their children build their lives – but they do not bear this responsibility alone.

Child care must be a shared responsibility. It is up to all of us – governments, communities, business and labour, families and individuals – to ensure parents receive the support they need to provide quality care for their children.

The discussion paper outlined a range of possible child care options and invited all British Columbians to respond and give their recommendations. On January 10, 2000 the government released an interim report on the results of the consultation. More than 7,200 British Columbians had responded by that time. The deadline was then extended to February 29, 2000 at the request of communities who asked for more time to provide feedback. In all, over 10,000 British Columbians responded to the paper.

The overwhelming majority (94 per cent) of respondents saw child care as an urgent issue and favoured more resources and support for child care by the federal and provincial governments. Most respondents, too, felt that further action by the government to make the current child care system more affordable and accessible would be merely stopgap measures. Instead, 90 per cent recommended that the provincial and federal governments go further and commit to a publicly funded child care system.

The care parents provide is the foundation on which our children build their lives. But changes in family structures, the economy and the workplace over the last couple of decades have placed additional pressures on both parents and children.

Today, there are more lone-parent families (primarily headed by women) than ever before, while in at least 84 per cent of all Canadian families there are now two working adults. Many parents, who in the past would have asked a relative to care for their children informally, now can no longer do so because their mothers, sisters and aunts are also working. The result - ever greater numbers of families depend on outside care for their children.

At the same time, changing job markets and federal cutbacks to social expenditures have made it harder for working families to get ahead. Access to appropriate, affordable child care is a major factor in working parents' ability to succeed in the labour market and gain economic security for their families.

However, many working families are having difficulty finding and affording the child care they need. A 1997 province-wide Parent - Child Care Needs Assessment survey, funded through the joint Canada/British Columbia Child Care Strategic Initiative, found that for 31 per cent of parents, child care-related issues interfered with their ability to either seek employment, remain in the paid labour market, or pursue education or training. The two most frequently cited barriers to accessing child care services were that child care is too expensive and that child care is unavailable during the hours when needed.

A FIRST STEP IN B.C.

The government of B.C. has listened to the recommendations of British Columbians and is acting on those recommendations. The 2000/01 provincial budget, released on March 27, 2000, commits the government to work towards publicly funded child care for B.C. and sets out British Columbia's first step in that direction - a new initiative to support safe, affordable before- and after-school care.

This initiative is about the safety of our children, quality of their care and affordability for parents. It will help more working parents to better their skills, improve their education and earn a better living, secure in the knowledge that their children are in good hands.

Beginning January 1, 2001 families seeking before- and after-school care for their children will be able to access publicly funded, licensed spaces on and off school sites. All licensed non-profit and for-profit child-care organizations providing before- and after-school care will receive grants from the province to maintain and expand existing spaces for children from grade one up to age 12. The service will be available during the school year at a cost to parents of \$7 a day and \$14 a day for school holidays.

The province has budgeted \$14 million for 2000/01 and \$30 million for 2001/02 to fund over 20,000 spaces for school-age children around the province under this initiative. This initiative to publicly fund before- and after- school care will put more B.C. children at an advantage. With this action, B.C. becomes only the second jurisdiction in North America to move to publicly funded child care. It brings our province in line with actions undertaken in many European countries over the past fifty years.

WHAT'S NEXT

Many social programs support families but child care is the backbone of them all. The provincial and federal governments must go further and make a commitment to a publicly funded system that entitles children of ALL ages to access affordable quality early childhood services.

The introduction of publicly funded, licensed before- and after-school care is an important first step in the right direction. The long-term goal is a comprehensive, publicly funded child care system for this province that meets the needs of British Columbians. In partnership with parents, child care providers and others, the government must continue to move forward to implement a made-in-B.C. approach tailored to the diverse needs of children, families and communities.

Here in British Columbia, we are taking action to build a comprehensive quality, affordable child care system that works - for all B.C. families. This is work that the provincial government of

whatever political stripe must continue to expand upon – for the sake of our children and for the long-term health of British Columbia.

FEDERAL CONNECTIONS

The October 1999 Throne Speech and Feb. 2000 budget committed the federal government to work with the provinces to reach a federal/provincial/territorial agreement on child development by December 2000 through the National Children's Agenda process.

FIRST MINISTERS' MEETING COMMUNIQUÉ ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

In Ottawa, September 11, 2000 the First Ministers, with the exception of the Premier of Quebec, agreed on the importance of supporting families and communities in their efforts to ensure the best possible future for their children. Every child should be valued and have the opportunities to develop his or her unique physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and creative potential. First Ministers therefore agreed to work together so that young children can fulfill their potential to be healthy, safe and secure, ready to learn, and socially engaged and responsible.

“In support of this common goal, governments will improve and expand early childhood development programs and services over time. Governments will work with families and communities to help meet the needs of young children and their families. Governments will report regularly on their progress and will continue to build knowledge and disseminate information to parents, communities and service providers to help them to give children the best possible start in life.

One of the four key areas for action is to strengthen early childhood development, learning and care. Quality early childhood development, learning and care have been shown to promote physical, language and motor skills; and social, emotional and cognitive development. This priority includes supports that promote healthy development, provide opportunities for interaction and play, help prepare children for school and respond to the diverse and changing needs of families. Possible examples include preschools, child care and targeted developmental programs for young children.

- First Ministers agree that ensuring effective early childhood development is a long-term commitment to our children's future.
- First Ministers agree that investments for early childhood development should be incremental, predictable and sustained over the long term.
- First Ministers are committed to helping all sectors of society support children in their early years and to making incremental investments in this area.

Therefore, First Ministers commit their governments to:

- report annually to Canadians on their investments and their progress in enhancing programs and services beginning with establishing a baseline of current early childhood development expenditures and activities. Governments will begin reporting within one year and will strive to continue to improve the quality of reporting over time;

- develop a shared framework, including jointly agreed comparable indicators to permit each government to report on progress in improving and expanding early childhood development programs and services. The framework will be developed in a manner that recognizes the different starting points and pressures in each jurisdiction and is informed by their diverse priorities. Examples would include indicators of the availability and growth of programs and services relating to early childhood development, learning and care; and community supports. Governments will report on the results of this work by September 2002 and annually thereafter, beginning with the development of indicators in areas identified as priorities by jurisdictions, and expanding with the overall development of early childhood development programs and services; and make regular public reports on outcome indicators of child well-being using an agreed upon set of common indicators to be developed by September 2002 related to the objectives established for early childhood development.

The purpose of performance measurement is for all governments to be accountable to their publics, not to each other. The amount of federal funding provided to any jurisdiction will not depend on achieving a given level of performance. Research, knowledge and information are the foundations of evidence-based decision-making and are critical to informed policy development. Dissemination of information and sharing of effective practices can create a more knowledgeable public on issues of child development and can promote the enhancement of early childhood development programs and services.

Governments agree to work together, where appropriate, on research and knowledge related to early childhood development, share information on effective practices that improve child outcomes and work together to disseminate the results of research. First Ministers direct Ministers responsible for Social Services and Health to begin implementation as soon as possible of the commitments and priorities outlined above.”

******It must be remembered that a comprehensive child care plan is the cornerstone of early childhood development services.******

DID YOU KNOW?

- More than three quarters of mothers with children aged 6-14 are in the workforce as are seven out of ten mothers with children under age 6. (Profiling Canada's Families II, Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000)
- Economists from Statistics Canada project that the labour participation of women aged 15-44 will rise from the current rate of approx. 71% to about 80% by the year 2011 (Our Child Care Workforce, Human Resource Sector Study on Child Care, 1998)
- Almost 400,00 children are born each year, and 86% of their mothers end up back in the workplace in a year. (February 25, 2000 - The Globe and Mail "A mother's dilemma: children or job")
- The Vanier Institute of the Family estimates that women in the labour force contribute approximately \$25.5 billion dollars a year in federal and provincial taxes (Speech by Dr. Robert Glossup, Vanier Institute of the Family)

- A 1998 national poll found that nearly 90% of Canadians think high quality child care is important to help ensure Canada's future social and economic well-being, and 81% think governments should develop a plan to improve child care (The Progress of Canada's Children: Into the Millennium, Canadian Council on Social Development, 1999)
- There has been a 400% increase in the use of paid child care services by preschool children of families since 1967 (Our Child Care Workforce, Human Resource Sector Study on Child Care, 1998)
- For every \$1 spent on child care there is a \$2 economic benefit (The Benefits and Costs of Good Child Care, Gordon Cleveland & Michael Krashinsky, 1998)
- In 1998 the cost of raising a child from birth to age 18 was estimated to be \$160 000 - up by \$4000 from 1995. The largest proportion of this cost - 33% was attributed to child care, and shelter was the next largest expenditure at 23% (The Progress of Canada's Children 1998: Focus on Youth, Canadian Council on Social Development, 1998)
- Between 1991 and 1998, the proportion of workers with dependants who reported excess tension due to family/work conflicts increased from 38% to 44% (The Progress of Canada's Children: Into the Millennium, Canadian Council on Social Development, 1999)
- Close to 1.4 million children use paid child care services in Canada but there are only about 500,000 regulated spaces (Our Child Care Workforce, Human Resource Sector Study on Child Care, 1998)
- A child's brain development in the first six years of life sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health (The Early Years Study: Reversing the Real Brain Drain - Dr. Fraser Mustard & Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain, 1998)
- Children's well-being and development suffer when they have poor quality care, and even an advantaged family background can't protect them (Partners in Quality, Canadian Child Care Federation, 1999)

THE FUTURE FOR B.C. CHILD CARE

All the factors documented above, come together to spotlight the road our provincial government must now travel with respect to investing in child care and early development services for children. We recognize that the investment in child care is an expensive one but the risks of not investing now will most certainly mean higher costs in the future.

Child care is not just a support for low income families nor a back-to-work strategy for the unemployed. Child care is as vital a service to a family as health care and education. Without access to care for their children – parents cannot work. High quality, affordable, child care is a fundamental building block for a healthy, tax-paying, voting, working parent. Low-income, middle-class, and

wealthy British Columbians all benefit from access to high quality early childhood programs that enrich their children's lives.

High quality child care/early childhood development has social value as a strategy to enhance all children's healthy development, as a support to families regardless of their labour force status, as part of a comprehensive approach to alleviating poverty, and as a key tool for pursuing women's equality. (Friendly, Martha. Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1997).

It must be said that tax cuts cannot begin to address the issue of child care services for families. It is inconceivable that tax cuts would ever replace the income of a working parent – nor would many parents want to forgo the benefits associated of working outside the home. Tax cuts will never create more licensed high quality child care services for children or train more early childhood educators to work in the field. Tax cuts will never help parents pay for child care services if those services do not exist.

Child care advocates, provincially and nationally, have found their political voice in recent years. More and more, working parents are demanding child care services be available and affordable to them. Child care, like health care, cannot be left to the private sector to deliver. Advocates will ensure that child care continues to build momentum leading up to the election call and that child care is front and centre for each candidate.

So, we congratulate the current government for their first, bold steps. We eagerly await the current Child Care Funding Assistance Plan being enconced into legislation and we fully expect that whichever party wins the next provincial election – that child care will continue to expand in a publicly funded, accountable system for British Columbia's children.