



Working together for a community based, non-profit child care system that is high quality, affordable, accessible, publicly funded and accountable.

CCCABC BC Budget 2009 Consultation Submission

October 2008

Once again, the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC is here to make our annual presentation to your committee.

Over the years we have made the case that:

1. **The early years matter.** Quality care is good for children – poor care can do harm. While parents and caregivers have known this for a long time – over the last decades the research has caught up with the lived experience and is now indisputable.
2. **BC families need child care.** A growing majority of mothers of young children are in the work force and they are there to stay. Their children need quality child care.
3. **Investing in child care makes good economic sense.** National and international cost-benefit studies confirm that if policy makers could project beyond their own terms of office – they would jump at the long term savings that public investment in quality child care will bring.
4. **Other jurisdictions do it – so can we.** Last year, we took the step of doing government's job for you by costing out a universal child care system for children aged 1–12. A system that would bring parent fees down to no more than 20% of the total cost and paid early childhood educators a living wage. A system that would provide parents with a range of real choices in their communities – part-time or full-time care and education programs located in centres, schools and licensed family homes. And, we demonstrated that BC has the capacity to build the system.

These arguments are equally valid today and, on their own, make the case for choosing child care as a top priority for BC's 2009 budget.

But – this year there are two arguments that make the need to choose child care even more compelling.

The first is that BC child care is now in crisis – a crisis that is being felt in communities across the province.

The current crisis is a direct result of failed provincial and federal child care policies. In 2002, the province cut \$40 million from its own child care budget – a cut which remains in place to this day.

Dedicated child care transfers from the federal government saved child care services in BC from complete collapse, but in 2006 a newly elected federal government cancelled the largest child care transfer agreement.

BC was the only province to pass the federal cuts onto families and service providers. And, BC was the only province to spend their remaining federal child care funds – close to \$100 million – on un-tendered grants and one time only expenditures. Booster seats, healthy baby DVD's, home visiting and parenting programs and research on children at risk – none of which helped to strengthen child care services in BC.

As a direct result of these failed policies, parent fees went up; wait lists grew and wages for early childhood educators dropped, forcing many to leave the field.

Communities have done the best they can – but it is no surprise that in a national poll conducted last month, 85% of British Columbians see lack of affordable child care as a serious issue – well above the national average of 77%. And, 90% of British Columbians think that government has an important role to play in helping families meet their child care needs – again above the national average of 83%.¹

The message is clear – a significant majority of British Columbians expect you to act on child care.

The second 'new' argument interestingly comes from BC's 2008 Throne Speech in which the government introduced the idea of expanded full school day kindergarten and early learning programs for 3 – 5 year olds.

If this reflects a new provincial commitment to universal, publicly funded and democratically controlled services for young children — the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC (CCCABC) views it as a victory for those who advocate on behalf of young children and working families.

We have provided detailed comments to the new Early Childhood Learning Agency about the key elements government needs to include in any expanded programs for young children, which we are happy to share with you. But – today we want to focus on the budget implications of this new development.

We understand that Treasury Board is already considering how much BC will invest in expanded universal programs for young children. Part of your job is to ensure that funds allocated to these programs are spent in ways that meet the needs of children, families and communities.

¹ *Attitudes Toward Child Care*: Environics Research Group, October 2008. Retrieved on October 14, 2008 from http://www.buildchildcare.ca/updir/buildchildcare/EnvironicsReport_Attitudes_toward_child_care.pdf

First – dollars need to go into programs that integrate care and learning rather than into programs that continue to divide BC's early learning and child care services. This is the only way to meet the developmental needs of young children and the needs of working families.

Then, dollars need to be invested in ways that build on community strengths rather than in ways that further destabilize already fragile child care services.

The best way to achieve these objectives is through public funding, at full parity, for early learning and care programs in both public/non-profit schools and community based settings.

Given the 2008 provincial Throne Speech commitment to 'full school day programming', a minimum entitlement would be 30 free hours a week which includes the standard 5 hour school day and a fully staffed lunch hour as required by young children.

Those requiring more than 30 hours a week of learning and care would still pay for additional hours but the cost of quality child care would come down significantly.

Equal public funding for school and community based programs will also make it possible for child care centers to recruit and retain qualified staff with expertise in working with very young children.

And, while more 'spaces' will still be needed, using existing child care spaces will reduce the cost of renovating schools to meet the needs of 3 – 5 year olds.

Again – the message is clear. If done well – expanded, publicly funded universal early care and learning programs can move us forward.

Finally, we know there are those who will suggest that the current economic uncertainties mean that once again, publicly funded child care should be shelved. We couldn't disagree more. During difficult times, our collective responsibility to help each other is more important than ever. In fact, if we really care about healthy child development, we have no option. As we speak to you today, the stress on families is increasing. Now is the time to provide communities with the tools and resources they need to build a child care system that supports families – as parents and as workers.

Last, but from this Committee's perspective not least, it is clear that an investment in high quality, universal child care services today will strengthen our economy tomorrow.

The reasons to make the right choice and invest in child care only continue to grow. Now it's up to you to act!