

Canada needs a national strategy to address the shortage of early childhood educators
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I would like to talk to you today about the workforce crisis in early childhood and its implications for one of the federal government's main initiatives and for the broader Canadian workforce.

Canada has about 2.4-million children age 5 and younger. If we were to exclude those under 1 year old, because their parents are potentially covered by federal parental leave, that leaves about 1.9- million preschoolers. For those 1.9 million preschoolers we have about 800,000 preschool child care spaces or enough capacity for about 40% of these children.

Child care is important. It's a big economic sector in its own right as it supports parents to work. When parents are able to work, family poverty is reduced and women's equity promoted. Parents' employment adds to the GDP and contributes to the tax base. The eminent economist, Dr. Pierre Fortin did an analysis of the impact of Quebec's low cost child care plan, and found that 70,000 more mothers were able to enter the workforce. Their increased tax contribution and reduced draw on social expenditures provided enough to pay for the entire public cost of the program.

Child care provides parents and society with marked benefits. Evidence shows that children also gain, both cognitively and socially, from being in a group setting.

Education has recognized the benefits of early learning and jurisdictions have been growing their school systems down to include younger children. Today over 40% of Canada's 4-year-olds are in school. School is not child care – but it does a lot of heavy lifting when it comes to child care. Mothers' workforce participation jumps when their children attend school full time. Full day kindergarten allows moms to enter the workforce at the same rate as they do when their children are in primary school.

A national child care plan has been a nagging idea for the past 60 years. It was a central demand of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. We have since had the Mulroney Plan, the Chretien Plan, the Martin Plan and now the Trudeau Plan. Each was unique but we will focus on the one before us. Provinces and Territories receive federal funds through bilateral

agreements requiring they develop child care spaces for low income, minority or marginalized families. The 10-year target is to create 40,000 more spaces.

It is good to address those who have traditionally been left out. But advocates for child care have worked hard to change the view of child care from a welfare program for poor moms, into a universal program which is an entitlement for all kids.

There are other restrictions. For example funds may not be spent in schools, a potential discouragement for jurisdictions that have been using the infrastructure of their schools to grow access. Also federal dollars may not be used to compensate the workforce.

Here lies the rub. Jurisdictions are running into a wall. They have the money for capital. They have the operating funds, but they don't have the workforce. In Ontario there are 2,500 positions requiring qualified ECEs that are filled by unqualified staff. Nova Scotia is in the third year of its preschool expansion and is off in Ireland trying to fill 400 ECE vacancies. The numbers are mounting. Today Canada is short an estimated 15,000 early childhood educators.

If the Trudeau plan survives the fate of its predecessors and isn't killed by a subsequent government, it will self implode because it lacks the educators to realize its goals. Canada has an early childhood workforce crisis. It needs an early childhood workforce strategy.

There are practical solutions within the federal government's purview. For example, allow early childhood educators working in schools to collect Employment Insurance during school breaks and summer holidays. EI treats ECEs like teachers, but ECEs make 40% to 60% of what teachers make.

When we need specialists to work in remote and understaffed positions, we know how to put together incentive packages for workers to train, relocate and work in these sectors. This can be done for ECEs.

Finally, UNICEF Canada just came out with its country report on the status of children in rich countries. When it comes to preschool, Canada ranks 37th in terms of disparities between young children. By the end of secondary school, we are in ninth place. In other words, our schools are doing an incredible job in narrowing the equity gap that confronts children on their first day of school.



Despite the petty criticisms leveled at public education it is the great equalizer; it is one of Canada's greatest accomplishments. But think how much better school would be if every child arrived with a quality preschool experience behind them. Imagine how they could excel as the next cohort of diverse, competent, civically engaged Canadians.

Quality education begins with quality early education and care and that takes qualified, well-compensated and respected educators.

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