

1.2 Child Care and Early Learning

“Child care is the ramp that provides equal access to the work force for mothers.”

— **Rosalie Abella**

The above statement was first published in the 1984 Royal Commission on Equality of Employment, and it continues to be true today. Indeed, in addition to being a key component of the eventual achievement of equality for women in the workforce, child care investment and services are key to the social and economic security of *all* Canadians. Quality child care services promote healthy children and families, stronger, more inclusive communities, and a productive, well-performing economy, as well as forwarding women’s equality.

Yet, in spite the extensive and compelling evidence outlining the positive outcomes that child care can accomplish for communities, families, the economy and equality, Canada continues to perform poorly when it comes to early learning and child care — particularly for a wealthy country. Canada ranks last out of 14 OECD countries in terms of public spending on early learning and child care (ELCC) programs and last out of 20 OECD countries in terms of family access to ELCC.¹ Outside of Quebec, regulated child care

spaces exist for fewer than 20% of Canada’s children, despite the fact that three-quarters of working women in Canada have young children.²

Research and evidence confirms what families already know from experience: that child care must —

- support children’s healthy development;
- meet public standards for quality;
- be publicly or community-owned and accessed;
- prioritize established community needs and plans; and
- be sustained through adequate operating funds.

These are the public investment approaches that are most likely to build a quality, universal ELCC system.

Child care is good for Canada’s children and families. Perhaps nowhere is this more true than when it comes to our Aboriginal children populations. Investments in Aboriginal early learning and child care, and particularly programs that are designed specifically for Aboriginal children, are widely recognized as a promising approach

to improving the well being of participating Aboriginal children and families. Yet a significant number of Aboriginal children do not have access to early learning and child care, despite what is known about the demonstrated positive long-term impact these programs can have on the lives of children. Indeed, the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey found that less than half (46%) of Aboriginal children aged zero to six living off-reserve spent time in child care, and only 16% of six-year-old Aboriginal children had attended early learning and child care programs specifically designed for Aboriginal children.

Despite the wide recognition of the benefits of child care for children's well-being, health and educational attainment, the last few years have been discouraging ones from the perspective of creating a nation-wide child care system. After significant time, energy, and resources were spent negotiating the 2005 Bilateral Agreements with the provinces in order to provide \$1.2 billion per year of committed and dedicated federal funding for the provision of child care services, those agreements were subsequently broken by Canada's current government. Those agreements were replaced with the Child Care Spaces Initiative, which planned to allot instead up to \$250 million — a reduction of \$950 million — by enticing businesses and non-profits to provide child care by way of incentives. This endeavour has proved to be unsuccessful, as most businesses are aware of the complex nature of child care provision and are reluctant to access the funds.

Along with the Spaces Initiative, the Conservatives introduced a taxable allowance of \$1,200 per year, per child under the age of six. Income support for families is a valid public policy goal, but it would be better delivered through the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB). Income support is not a replacement for a child care system.

The direct cash transfers to families that the current federal government has introduced provides no accountability for the quality and affordability of child care services that parents can ac-

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In 2004, 73% of all women with children under age 16 living at home were part of the employed workforce. In 2004, 65% of all women with children under age 3 were employed.⁴

In 2004, almost three out of four employed women with at least one child under age 16 at home were employed full time.⁵

In 2003, the poverty rate was 48.9% for single-parent mothers compared to 20% for single-parent fathers.⁶

cess with these funds. By taking a hands-off approach to the creation of new spaces and refusing to set standards for care, the Harper government's approach opens the door wide to private operators whose first priority is profit, not service. And already, profit-seeking multinationals are walking through that open door. A large-scale, foreign-owned corporation with links to Australia has begun contacting child care centres in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario, and has made purchases in the latter two provinces.

For these and other reasons, Canada risks repeating the Australian experience, where corporate child care dominates and where increased public funding has not translated into making quality programs more available and affordable. Instead, high fees, service gaps, and public concerns about quality characterize the Australian experience.³ Meanwhile, corporate profits have escalated. The lesson of Australia should be a lesson to Canadians that now, more than ever, emphasis must be placed on services being publicly or community owned and accessed.

Despite the federal government's funding cuts, and the risk of foreign-owned corporate child care, Canadians have not given up on a national system of ELCC services. The broadly based pan-Canadian Code Blue for Child Care Campaign which was launched in 2006 continues to fight for the child care system that Canadians want and need. Over the past year, the campaign has placed a great deal of focus on supporting the

federal Bill C-303, the Early Learning and Child Care Act, a private member's bill introduced by MP Denise Savoie (NDP). This act would establish criteria and conditions for funding early learning and child care programs in order to ensure the quality, accessibility, universality, and accountability of those programs.

The AFB supports national child care legislation, as proposed by Bill C-303. Legislation must ensure standards and entitlement to ELCC opportunities, based on the principles of quality and universality. Further, legislation must specify that expansion of child care services will be funded directly (rather than user-pay), and that accountability will be improved through public reporting to legislatures and clear provincial and territorial action plans, with timelines and targets.

Child care requires a secure and adequate source of federal funding, so legislation will be combined with significant investments in ELCC services through a dedicated child care social transfer. The long-term plan that has been developed by child care advocates recommends funding that builds to \$10 billion in annual child care support. This investment represents less than 1% of Canada's GDP. That level of funding would make available a quality, affordable child care space to all children under six in Canada on either a part-time or a full-time basis, and it would be consistent with minimum recommendations by our European counterparts.

Research tells us that investment in a quality, universal child care system provides 2:1 economic returns. It's also interesting to note that an analysis of the Quebec child care system indicates that \$0.40 out of every \$1 invested in its child care services is returned to the provincial economy the following year, primarily in increased taxes arising from higher labour force participation. This analysis paints a convincing economic picture, but the same research also tells us that the increase in labour force participation comes largely from the enhanced ability

of women to play a larger role in their own economic security and well-being.

In order to achieve the long-term goals for child care, the AFB will increase total annual funding for ELCC to \$5 billion by 2011–12, by which time all children aged three to five should have access to a quality child care space in their community. Starting in 2008–09, building this system requires dedicated federal transfers to the provinces and territories for child care services.

In addition to funds already committed under the 2003 Multilateral Framework Agreement on ELCC (\$350 million) and the Child Care Spaces Initiative (\$250 million), for a total of \$600 million, **the AFB provides an additional transfer of \$1.1 billion in 2008–09, \$2.2 billion in 2009–10, and \$3.3 billion in 2010–11.**

The total child care and early learning budget is thus \$1.7 billion in 2008–09, reaching \$2.8 billion in 2009–10 and \$3.9 billion in 2010–11, and finally \$5 billion in 2011–12.

Notes

- 1 OECD. "Starting Strong II: Early childhood education and care." Paris, France: OECD; 2006.
- 2 Statistics Canada. "Women in Canada: A gender-based statistical report." 5th edition. Statistics Canada, 2006.
- 3 Code Blue for Child Care. Hindsight from Australia — Foresight for Canada. October, 2007: Accessed online, February 5th, 2008 (http://www.buildchildcare.ca/updir/buildchildcare/HindsightfromAustralia_ForesighttoCanada.pdf).
- 4 <http://www.statcan.ca/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=89-503-X>
- 5 <http://www.statcan.ca/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=89-503-X>
- 6 National Council of Welfare Report, "Poverty Profile, 2002 and 2003," Summer 2006.