

CHILD CARE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

HOW GOOD IS CANADA'S CHILD CARE?

by Jan Poudrier, PAC Chair, RTO/ERO District 43 (Nipissing)

INTRODUCTION

How can we build a truly great nation unless everyone, regardless of income or region, has access to the same high quality health care? How can we build a great nation unless every family has access to high quality early learning and child care regardless of income or region? We can't! In effect, quality early learning and developmental supports are essential to improving all of the so-called "determinants of well-being" and producing industrious, independent adults who are able to reach their potential.

At the heart of building a great nation and a better Canada is what Roy Romanow calls a "shared destiny". The concept of collective action embraces values such as fairness, opportunity, respect, tolerance, acceptance, caring and compassion and a balance between individual endeavour and social benefit. If it were not for this, we would not have a national railroad, universal hospitalization and health care, public education, unemployment insurance, support for the poor, a social safety net, and pensions for the aged. Each generation has achieved one of these milestones thanks to the nation's commitment to a shared destiny.

A milestone was reached in the 2000 Federal budget, when Prime Minister Paul Martin announced that mothers or fathers would be paid for a year's maternity leave and not be at risk of losing their jobs. Conversely, our neighbour, the United States of America, gives their mothers only six weeks of maternity leave. Just recently, in fact, we came closer to achieving another milestone in Canada's history when our senior levels of government committed to kick-starting a much awaited national early learning and child care program by signing agreements with all of the provinces at a cost of 5 billion dollars.

While a change of government in the last federal election has altered the progress of this remarkable vision, the quality of its nation-building character and the public's support for it will hopefully win out because of our strong belief that child care benefits are both social and economic. Hopefully, we can regard this unfortunate postponement as just a bump in the road.

RATIONALE FOR A UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE PROGRAM

It has been evident since the early 90's that a growing disparity exists between young families and family heads over 45. The benefits of economic growth have not been enjoyed by our younger families due to high educational debt loads and a labour market that has undergone dramatic changes in over a decade as a result of downsizing and restructuring. Many young people have not been able to attain fulfilling employment

because the large baby boom population are still working. Many of the baby boomers cannot retire because they have not adequately planned for their financial futures in their old age. The fact that the Ontario government has removed the mandatory retirement age of 65 will also not help the younger generation. We need to equip our future generations to deal with the demands of this large aging baby boom population.

Many of our young people are not financially established until they are in their thirties. As a result, they are not committing to a relationship until they are past thirty and not starting a family because they cannot afford to put their careers on hold for children or pay the extra expense of childcare. The longer they postpone having a family, the greater the possibility that they will not have children either through choice or declining fertility.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has released figures Feb 2007 revealing that enrolment in public schools peaked in about 2002-2003 and is now in serious decline. Total enrolment at peak was nearly 2 million but will probably drop to 1,902,000 by 2010. The birth dearth as baby boomer' offspring have finished moving through the school system and the fact that they give birth to fewer children has many financial implications. Many schools have such low enrolment that they are forced to close. This is the first indicator of economic problems and, I suspect, the canary in the coal mine. With fewer children we get fewer adults, fewer taxpayers and a lower national tax base, and lower contributions to pension and health care plans. If the solution envisaged by our universal health and pension plans is followed we should ensure there are enough children born each generation to keep a birth rate of 2.2. I believe the absence of adequate child care will prevent the increase in the birth rate. It becomes not only a problem for parents, but for seniors, too. Therefore, we should be advocating for better day care solutions for our children and grandchildren because we care what happens to them, but also because it directly affects us.

Now is the time to invest in the workforce of tomorrow and to ensure that young families have the supports that they need to achieve a prosperous future. A recent Environics poll reinforced the fact that the Canadian public, places a high value on quality early learning and child care programs that are affordable and accountable. The vast majority of Canadians from coast to coast understand that the lack of affordable child care poses a serious economic challenge for our nation. There is too much at stake to abort all the progress that has been achieved in forging a consensus for child care as the next building block for a better and progressive Canada. A national child care program needs to be reinstated as a first step toward quality, affordable, accessible and accountable child care. How a national early learning and child care program will be constructed has yet to be determined and will require creative solutions for such a complex problem.

CHILD CARE CHOICES

The magazine Today's Parent published an article on care of children in its February 2007 edition called "**Child Care: What Canadian Parents Need Now**" by John Hoffman. In an online survey conducted in September 2006, parents were asked **what**

kinds of child care they use, what they think of it, what problems they have and how government can help. A total of 5284 readers responded from mostly, Anglophone, middle class mothers living outside Quebec. Their responses suggest that there is nothing simple about contemporary families' child care needs.

Specifically:

- Finding, keeping and paying for care isn't easy.
- Part-time arrangements are common: including a parent at home (38% full-time taking into account maternity leave & 6% part-time); licensed child care centre (16% full-time & 7% part-time); licensed or unlicensed home daycare (14% full-time & 11% part-time); care by a relative such as grandparents (5% full-time & 17% part-time); off-shifting which means parents working different hours (5% full-time & 8% part-time); nursery schools such as Montessori (1% full-time & 10% part-time); babysitter (1% full-time & 3% part-time); nanny (1% full-time & 1% part-time), other (3% full-time & 0% part-time). **Many families use multiple arrangements to patch their week together which accounts for the remarkably high prevalence of part-time care – 43% of the arrangements listed.**
- Many parents have concerns about the quality of care that's available to them e.g. child to caregiver ratio.
- Parents' wish list for government child care policy goes well beyond the narrow choices the major parties were offering in the last election.
- There's surprising consensus between employed and stay-at-home parents as to what families really need.

COST OF CARE

The cost of childcare was the top challenge of daycare with 59% of respondents saying it was a financial hardship. Fees for full-time childcare in Canada range from less than \$150.00 per month, in Quebec's heavily subsidized system, to as high as \$1400 a month in some cities or up to \$30,000 a year to hire a nanny. Private schools such as Montessori charge \$27 for a half day or \$39 for a full day with \$5 extra for lunch and \$5 extra for before and after school programs. Two children in most daycare arrangements will cost twice as much except for a nanny in the home who can look after more than one child.

Staying home comes with high costs too. Equality for women in choosing and maintaining a career is also at stake. Sixty-two percent of parents at home full-time said they had financial difficulties as a result. And some employed parents might prefer to be at home, but can't afford it. One in eight parents working full-time said they'd had financial difficulties due to staying at home. Some stay-at-home moms might be in the paid labour force (at least part-time) if it were easier to find good, affordable child care. Families who were parenting at home were only slightly less likely than employed parents to cite concerns about quality of care, and many of them also reported difficulty

in finding care, including part-time or outside normal working hours. Childcare for special needs children was even more difficult.

CHILD CARE CHALLENGES

The statistics from the Today's Parent Survey show the percentages of parents who viewed the various challenges as a problem. They are:

High Cost of Care – 59%	Concerns about quality – 50%
Difficulty finding full-time in a centre – 39%	Couldn't afford to stay home -39%
Difficulty finding a space in a convenient location – 35%	Difficulty finding part-time – 32%
Difficulty finding child care outside normal hours – 30%	Difficulty finding home day care - 29%
Stay at home financial problems – 28%	Lack of information about child care options – 23%
Child had trouble adjusting – 11%	Difficulty finding any care -10%
Difficulty finding a nanny - 5%	Special needs spaces - 2%

In spite of all the problems they reported, most respondents were satisfied with their current care arrangements. However, it's worth noting that researchers have found that parents tend to be optimistic when assessing their children's care, so much so that they call it a "positivity bias."

WHAT PARENTS WANT

Statistics from the Parent's Today Survey show the percentage of parents in each want category. They are:

Increased tax breaks and credits for all parents of children under six – 51%
Tax breaks ore credits specifically for stay-at-home parents – 46 %
Legislation that would require employers to allow parents of young children to work part-time or more flexible hours - 45%
Longer maternity or parental leave - 42 %
Direct payments to all parents of children six and under – 40%
Funding to improve child care quality (e.g. more training, lower child/staff ratios) – 37 %
Funding to reduce child care fees for all families – 36 %
Funding to create more child care spaces – 31%
Legislation that would require licensing and regulation of all home daycare providers – 17%
Funding to increase the number of part-time spaces – 16%

Funding to reduce fees for low-income families – 14%

HOW GOVERNMENTS CAN HELP

The Conservatives' taxable \$100 a month assists modestly with both the cost of child care and financial hardships reported by stay-at-home parents. The Conservative plan to subsidize workplace child care has not resulted in a single space being provided. In addition, it also has not addressed concerns about quality and accountability.

On the other hand, the now cancelled \$5-billion investment in the child care infrastructure established by the Liberals and NDP in 2005 might have helped some stay-at-home parents get back to the workforce by providing more affordable day care spaces and a more regulated child care system, but does nothing for the parent who wants to be at home while the children are young. It also doesn't provide tax deductions for the cost of cooperative pre-school two mornings a week or other day care options.

One survey suggests that many families are looking for a compromise between the life of two full-time working parents and that of a one-income family. The popularity of improved tax breaks for all parents, longer maternity leave and legislation to protect parents' rights to work part-time or flexible hours (currently law in Sweden) have to be taken into consideration by governments in constructing a national child care program that meets the needs of all parents.

CONCLUSION

A high quality early learning and child care program regardless of income or region is essential, but at the same time extremely complex. Also, child care is a significant political issue for parents. While poll respondents ranked it a distant second to health care (17% vs.71%), nevertheless, they place child care ahead of the environment, higher education and defence as a priority for government spending. And nine out of 10 parents said a political party's stand on child care influences their vote, with 21% saying it strongly determines their vote.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That RTO/ERO advocate and lobby the Provincial and Federal governments for a high quality early learning and child care system that is affordable, accountable and accessible to all parents in every region of Canada.
2. That this report be attached to the Senate Report and/or be made available to Districts.

Respectfully submitted by,

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