

CODE BLUE for child care



EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE: WHAT'S NEEDED

Stephen Harper's government has broken faith with Canadian families and children and with provinces/territories by cutting funds that would have started to build a new national early learning and child care system. Canadian parents will long remember the Conservative party's role in this setback.

But, now it's time to look ahead. It's time to embrace a compelling vision for the future of early learning and child care.

Code Blue for Child Care is putting forward a program that can excite parents' imagination and serve children's interests. It reflects Canadians' values of equity, fairness and justice. It presents a community building alternative to Stephen Harper's 'go it alone' approach. And, it respects provincial/territorial jurisdiction while defining a federal role in shaping and financing a system of early learning and child care for Canada's preschool children.

Until now, there have been two main views about how to move forward on early learning and child care. Stephen Harper's view is that it should be a responsibility that families shoulder alone. The other view, that all the federal government need do is transfer funds to provinces/territories based on loosely defined principles and then leave it to those governments to decide how to spend the money, regrettably has not worked.

Code Blue is proposing a different and exciting approach. We believe the next federal government should advance a bold vision for developmental early learning and child care programs for Canadian children 0- 12 (outside of regular school hours for school-aged children) – a vision that places public or not-for-profit early learning and child care at the heart of strong, caring and inclusive communities.

As the first priority step, the next federal government should commit that there will be a space in a public or not-for-profit early learning and child care program for every 3, 4 and 5 year-old child in the country. These spaces would be: accessible to children of every level of ability and all backgrounds; designed to meet the needs of working families and families with parents not in the paid labour force in both rural and urban communities; affordable for every family that wishes to participate; and of high educational/ developmental quality to give every child an opportunity to learn and develop to the best of his/her ability – truly “educational” in the broadest sense.

Based on discussion with the provinces/territories, the federal government would provide funding to phase in a universal, inclusive, accessible, affordable, non-profit and high quality system of early learning and child care, with a commitment to meet the needs of all 3-5 year olds during the next federal government's first mandate.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Why prioritize 3-5 year olds?

Building the universal early learning and child care system for all children 0-12 (outside of regular school hours for school-age children) is a significant project that will have to be undertaken incrementally. Conservatively, it may take up to a decade to build this new social program. Research confirms that focused investment is the best way to reverse the unplanned, unfocused “market” approach to ELCC program development that has produced Canada’s “patchwork of services for young children”. This proposal calls for an initial federal focus on 3-5 year olds for two main reasons:

- a) As many 3-4 year olds and most 5 year olds already attend some type of organized ELCC programs (child care centres, nursery schools, junior and senior kindergartens), the additional net public cost of providing for this age group universally is manageable;
- b) There is strong public agreement in Canada about the benefits of early childhood education programs for 3-5 year olds so beginning ‘system building’ with this age group builds on this strength. .

What about infants, toddlers and school-aged children?

The goal of the national early learning and child care system will be universal access to good quality programs for all children aged 0-12 as their parents choose, taking into account widespread use of paid parental leave and regular elementary school hours. Focusing on early learning and child care for all children in the 3-5 age range as the first benchmark in the national vision will allow demonstration of the benefits of good quality early childhood education and will be well accepted by the public.

At the same time, provinces/territories would continue and even expand support for early learning and child care programs for infants, toddlers and school-agers. The next phase of focus of the Canada-wide early learning and child care program will be to secure public support to expand early childhood learning and care programs for younger and older ages, as has been done in Quebec and in European countries.

How much will it cost?

In 1998, Cleveland and Krashinsky, economists at the University of Toronto, estimated the cost of providing good quality early childhood education and care to every child 2-5 years of age in Canada. At that time, the cost would have been \$7.9 billion. An up-to-date estimate would show that (assuming parental contributions for some parts of programs and maintaining current public funding levels and including the required capital investments) the cost would be \$4.8 billion or less to offer a place in a good quality early childhood education program for every 3-5 year old every child in Canada. This amounts to an average of \$153 per Canadian per year...a bargain to make sure that every child gets a good start in life.

What is the impact on the federal budget?

We are proposing that the federal government grow the budget for early learning and child care by \$1.2 billion each year. This would allow the new program to be developed

gradually (allowing time for the training of staff, putting in place capital infrastructure, and so forth). The full funding required for children 3-5 years would be achieved in four years time, when the annual budget would reach \$4.8 billion.

Can the federal government afford such a big investment?

Canada is one of the wealthiest countries in the world and is the only G7 country to have experienced surpluses in every one of the last ten years. Despite our economic strength, Canada invests only 0.25% of GDP on early learning and child care – the lowest of 14 OECD countries. The accepted international benchmark for public spending on early learning and child care programs is *at least* 1% of GDP for children 0-5 years.

Economic analysis shows that investment in quality, universal early learning and child care brings at least 2:1 returns to the economy down the road. Moreover, the Quebec experience shows that 40% returns are realized immediately from increased income taxes alone, thanks to increased labour force participation. Thus, the net child care system cost of \$4.8 billion for 3-5 year olds fits well within Canada's existing fiscal framework and, if prioritized appropriately, could be funded entirely through projected underlying federal surpluses.

How much will parents have to pay?

One way to think about parent fees is to assume that they would represent about 15-20% of the total budget. How parents pay could follow several models. One approach is to provide public funding for a certain number of hours for all children and apply fees for additional hours as is the norm for 3-5 year olds in many countries. Another approach is to charge parents a low flat fee as in Quebec. Or, fees could be based on a sliding scale, geared to family income. Different provinces/territories might have different approaches but the common requirement is to ensure that early learning and child care are affordable for all.

What about the needs of employed parents?

As the large majority of parents of preschool-age children are employed or studying, programs for children must support early childhood development and meet the needs of working and studying families. This means that programs need to be available for the full working day throughout the calendar year. The first priority is to provide universal access for 3-5 year olds during standard daytime working hours with future consideration of approaches that meet the needs of families working non-standard hours.

What about families with a stay-at-home parent?

Early childhood education - early learning experiences and play with peers - is a benefit for all children whose families want to use it. Many families with a stay-at-home parent already use junior kindergarten, kindergarten, preschool or nursery school and the Quebec program is very popular with families with a stay-at-home parent. This program would extend this opportunity to all 3-5 year-olds with parents making the choice.

What about parental choice?

Early learning and child care should certainly not be compulsory; parents who prefer not to use these programs should be free to make that choice. Programs would be organized at the community level to meet local needs including full and part time programs. Ideally, parents would be able to choose from a range of quality options, depending on the capacity of the community. Details of program organization would depend on provinces/territories and local communities. However, the rhetoric of parental choice cannot be used to justify a weak patchwork of poorly resourced programs.

What about ownership?

Evidence shows that ownership of a program does make a difference to quality. Using well-established measures of quality, the evidence in Canada shows that the commercial sector is less dedicated to quality than the public and non-profit sector. They are less likely to employ trained staff, they hire fewer staff per child, and their staff is much less likely to engage in regular professional development. When quality is difficult for consumers to accurately assess (as with early childhood education), organizations whose main dedication is to making profits often deliver bad results. For these reasons, Code Blue believes that the government should limit future funding to public and non-profit programs. Existing owners who offer quality services will be grand-parented under new arrangements.

What about quality?

Improving the quality of early learning and child care programs would be among the main priorities for provinces/territories when developing universal programs for 3-5 year olds and, indeed, for children of all ages. Early childhood programs that do not ensure that children have developmental, enriching and enjoyable experiences cannot be termed early childhood education. Today's recommended best practices from a wealth of studies show the best ways to ensure that all early childhood programs meet a high standard.

What about low-income families?

There is evidence that suggests that children of low-income families will be especially likely to benefit from good quality play-based early education programs. Special efforts should be made to permit and encourage their participation including eliminating fees entirely (where there are fees). However, research shows that children from middle class and affluent families also benefit from early childhood education and should have full access. Overall, segregating children from low-income families in targeted early childhood programs achieves nothing and indeed, loses much. And as the OECD has pointed out, poverty must be addressed through "upstream" social and labour policies; early childhood programs alone cannot alleviate poverty or its effects.

What about children with special support needs?

Children with special needs should share early childhood education experiences with their typically developing peers. From the perspective of equity and as a basic human rights principle, children with special needs will participate in inclusive services that are properly resourced to meet their needs. Parents of children with special needs will have

the same range of choices available to their families as do other families in their communities.

What about parents living in rural, remote and northern Canada?

Just like children in cities, children living outside of urban settings need access to quality child care. Parenting and work patterns of rural families have changed. Whether it is on the farm, in the villages, or by commuting to distant towns or cities, mothers in rural communities are working. Child care is a necessary support for today's young rural parents. Just like all children have the right to access kindergarten, children living outside of urban settings should have the same right to the early learning benefits of quality child care.

What about the needs of francophone families outside of Quebec?

Research shows that to ensure the survival of our vibrant francophone linguistic minority in Canada, quality early learning and child care programs need to be accessible in both French and English in communities throughout the country. When we call for an inclusive early learning and child care system, we mean one that provides access to French language programs.

What about provincial responsibility for education and kindergartens?

Provinces are responsible for education and child care programs and may design these however they determine will serve the interests of their constituencies.

The federal government will help finance development of integrated kindergarten/child care programs to provide seamless early learning and care. The federal government shares with the provinces a commitment to the promotion of equality of opportunity under the constitution, which it achieves through social transfers and equalization. The offer of federal dollars to the provinces to ensure access to developmental programs for all young children is in keeping with this commitment. Any province or territory may refuse this financial offer. However, because the federal priorities are in line with parental wishes and the expressed priorities of provincial/territorial governments through previous federal/provincial agreements, it is likely that federal and provincial/territorial governments will be able to reach agreements.

What about Quebec?

Quebec has expanded its early learning and child care programs to ensure much better accessibility than others; in 2004, Quebec's spending on regulated child care comprised 65% of Canada's total spending. To reflect this, Quebec would negotiate to use federal funds in ways that reflect Quebec's particular needs and priorities.

What about the 2005 agreements?

The 2004/2005 agreements have been abrogated by the Harper government and federal funding will cease March 31, 2007. Even though it might be possible to simply reinstate these agreements, at this point it makes sense to begin discussions with provinces based on a new federal vision of beginning to build a system of early learning and child care for children from 0-12 with a clear and achievable focus on 3-5 year olds.

To make this work, the next federal government would provide a guarantee of continuing funding to provinces/territories by passing enabling legislation in the form of an Early Learning and Child Care Act and by including a five-year funding guarantee in each successive budget. Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that provinces/territories will be unwilling to accept federal funding directed at the early education of its young citizens. The federal government recognizes that provision of early learning and child care is in provincial jurisdiction and notwithstanding the federal vision for 3-5 year olds, will try very hard to reach agreement on provincial/territorial plans to deliver early childhood programs as long as they respect the QUAD principles already agreed upon. And provinces/territories may want to design innovative and flexible programs to serve special circumstances.

Would there be support?

We know that Canadian parents strongly support early education for their 3-5 year-old children. In fact, many 3-4 year olds and most 5 year olds already attend some type of organized early learning and child care programs (child care centres, nursery schools and kindergartens, for example).

But these programs are poorly co-coordinated and many are poorly resourced. Some are provided only for fractions of days or weeks so they provide inadequate support for working families. . Some offer poor or uneven educational quality for children and fail to include children with disabilities. Most charge fees making it difficult for many low and modest income parents to send their children. Indeed, Canadian taxpayers are getting poor value for the public funds that are invested.

This proposal would capitalize on public support and would use best practices in policy and practice to ensure that Canadian children and families are well served with Canadian public revenues.