

Child Care Advocacy Forum

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BC Association of
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Coalition of Child Care
Advocates of BC

Early Childhood
Educators of BC

School Age Child Care
Association of BC

Westcoast Child Care
Resource Centre

Western Canada Family
Child Care Association
of BC

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Brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance 2003 Pre-Budget Hearings August, 2003

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Organizational Information

The BC Child Care Advocacy Forum is an alliance of six provincial child care organizations that bring together over 4000 individuals, child care providers and community organizations who are concerned about child care in BC. Since 1999, the member organizations of the Advocacy Forum have advanced a Common Vision and Agenda for Child Care in BC.

The Advocacy Forum advocates for a publicly funded child care system that:

- ✓ Entitles all children to access quality child care programs regardless of their families' economic or employment status.
- ✓ Offers families choices from a range of coordinated, licensed, affordable, quality child care and early childhood programs.
- ✓ Provides early childhood educators with wages, benefits and working conditions that are commensurate with their responsibilities.
- ✓ Is the cornerstone of a comprehensive early childhood development strategy and a key piece of comprehensive family policy that includes extended parental leave and progressive family/work policies.

The Case for Publicly Funded Child Care

For over three decades, a growing body of research has documented the need for a comprehensive child care system in Canada; the benefits to children, families, and society at large of public investment in quality child care; and the degree to which Canada is lagging behind other developed countries in addressing this issue.

A brief overview of some key findings of the research indicates that:

1. Most Canadians support our vision.

Results of a 2002 poll on "Perceptions of Quality Child Care" show that:

- 90% of Canadians want a nationally coordinated child care plan that gives all children access to quality child care.
- 86% of Canadians support a publicly funded child care system that makes quality child care available to all children.
- 88% of Canadians support increased wages for caregivers.

(Millward Brown Goldfarb for Canadian Child Care Federation/Child Care Advocacy Assn. of Canada)

2. Quality child care is good for children.

"There is encouraging evidence that good nutrition, nurturing and responsive caregiving in the first years of life, linked with good early child development programs, improve the outcomes for all children's learning, behaviour and physical and mental health throughout life."

(1999, McCain, Mustard, Early Years Study)

3. Public investment in child care makes good economic sense.

A 1998 cost-benefit analysis of child care in Canada concluded that for every \$1 invested in licensed child care there is a \$2 benefit. (The Benefits and Costs of Good Child Care, Cleveland and Krashinsky)

4. Other countries recognize the value of investing in the early years.

“Improving the quality of, and access to early childhood education and care has become a major policy priority in OECD Member countries....the early years are increasingly viewed as the first step in lifelong learning and a key component of a successful education, social and family policy agenda.”

(Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001)

5. Child care in Canada and BC lags behind.

A 2001 study of Canadian child care found that other than in Quebec, over the last decade, regulated child care has declined, policy incoherence has grown and Canada has fallen behind other countries. (Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada, 2001, Friendly, Beach and Turiano)

A survey of 700 BC caregivers in the fall of 2002 indicates that as a result of provincial funding cuts, 57% of child care programs have fewer subsidized children, 49% have decreased enrolment, 31% have had to increase fees, 19% fear they may have to close their doors in the near future and 52% are concerned about their future viability. (Where Are The Children, 2002, BC Child Care Advocacy Forum)

Lessons Learned from Recent Federal Initiatives

Over the last three years, the federal, provincial and territorial governments (except Quebec) have reached two agreements related to early childhood and child care – the 2001 **Early Childhood Development Agreement** (ECDI) and the 2003 **Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care**. Under these arrangements, the federal government will transfer \$412.6 million to BC over an 8 year period to help support a range of early childhood development services, including regulated child care.

While the Advocacy Forum welcomes a renewed willingness on the part of the federal government to accept some responsibility for developing a child care system that meets the needs of all of Canada’s children, we have identified three serious flaws in the approach used to date:

1. Federal funds committed to date are insufficient. Under the transfer arrangements now in place, the federal government has committed a total of \$1.435 billion over an 8 year period for a wide range of early childhood programs including, but not limited to, licensed child care. By comparison, in 2002, the National Liberal Caucus Social Policy Committee recommended federal spending of \$10.9 billion over a 4 year period on child care. And, the European Union, recommends that countries spend at least 1% of their GDP on child care. In Canada, this would result in \$10 billion annually spent on child care.
2. Provincial and territorial accountability for how federal funds are allocated is inadequate. This was first apparent when BC and other provinces allocated little or none of their ECDI funds to child care. To date, BC has reported that only spent \$6 million of the \$159.9 million received under the ECDI agreement on regulated child care.

As a result of similar concerns elsewhere, the Advocacy Forum and others called for additional federal funds dedicated to regulated child care. While the level of funding provided under the resulting Multilateral Framework was very disappointing, we were pleased by the clear focus on regulated child care. However, BC has announced that it will spend the \$3.3 million received this year under the Multilateral Framework on a program which, while it used to support the inclusion of children with extra support needs in regulated child care, is now being 'refocused' to provide some support for inclusion in settings such as community centres and libraries. While inclusion in these programs is the right of every child, they do not and cannot replace the need for quality, affordable, regulated child care.

3. Federal funds are being used to replace rather than supplement provincial child care spending. At the same time as BC is allocating a mere pittance of federal funds to child care, the province is cutting much larger amounts from its own child care budget. Federal funds are being used to redress some of the most glaring cuts but overall, children, families and communities in BC are worse off – not better.

Recommendations to the Standing Committee on Finance

While the federal government is to be commended for taking some important first steps in addressing the child care crisis in Canada, regrettably the transfer arrangements now in place have not had the desired outcome and have, to some degree, increased disparities across the country.

However, there are concrete steps the federal government can and must take to ensure that its stated intentions of supporting the 'critical early years' of children's development become a reality.

We therefore urge the Standing Committee on Finance to recommend that the upcoming federal budget:

1. Commit sufficient federal funds to develop a publicly funded child care system that meets the needs of all of Canada's children (birth to twelve years of age) regardless of their ability, family income or employment status, language, culture or geographic location.
2. Require that, as a condition of receiving federal child care funds, provinces/territories agree to use the funds to develop publicly funded, high quality, accessible and affordable child care systems that meet the diverse needs of the children and families in their jurisdictions.
3. Require that provinces/territories table 5 year incremental plans with timelines and targets for the development of a child care system and provide clear, annual reporting on their progress against these targets and timelines.
4. Require that provinces/territories maintain or increase their child care spending and use federal funds to supplement rather than replace provincial/territorial child care funding.
5. Establish mechanisms to ensure provincial/territorial compliance with the terms of federal/ provincial/territorial agreements that include active community participation in monitoring provincial/ territorial progress and resolving disagreements and disputes.