

2772 East Broadway
Vancouver BC V5M 1Y8

PHONE 604 515 6257
TOLL FREE 1 877 361 1116
FAX 604 709 5662

www.advocacyforum.bc.ca

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

BC Association of
Child Care Employers

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
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BC Child Care Advocacy Forum Submission to the Select Standing Committee on Finances and Government Services October 2008

Investing in Child Care is the BEST Choice

Introduction

The BC Child Care Advocacy Forum welcomes the opportunity to appear before this committee again this year to make the case that the **best choice** BC can make in the 2009 budget is to invest in a universally accessible, high quality, publicly funded system of early childhood care and learning.

The Advocacy Forum is an alliance of six provincial child care organizations that have worked together since 1999 to advance a Common Vision and Agenda for Child Care in BC. Together, we represent thousands of front-line providers and employers from all types of child care, families and concerned citizens. As a result our positions reflect the highest level of consensus that exists within BC's child care community today.

The evidence and the lived experience of BC children, families, caregivers and communities support this high level of consensus on 4 key points:

1. Current policy approaches to child care have failed.
2. As a result, child care in BC is in crisis.
3. There are solutions.
4. Others do it – we can too.

Current Approaches have Failed

Since 2001, BC cut \$40 million from its own child care budget. These cuts were being restored with federal transfer funds, which, under the Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, were designated for child care and couldn't be spent on other things.

As we all know, in 2006, the federal government cancelled this agreement replacing it with a taxable allowance of \$100 a month to families for every child under 6. They also transferred some funds to BC that they hoped BC would use to build child care spaces.

BC was the only province to pass the federal cuts onto families and caregivers arguing that parents could now use their federal benefit to pay higher child care fees.

BC then spent close to \$100 million in remaining federal funds in a flurry of one-time-only un-tendered expenditures that did not build a system.

Since then, BC has continued to limit its involvement to a subsidy program for low income parents, small operating grants to providers and partial capital grants for minimal space creation – without a public, accountable vision of where they are headed, all without a plan, without timelines and without targets.

Instead, the provincial 'action' has shifted to the Ministry of Education which is exploring 'early learning' programs for 3, 4 and 5 year olds, regrettably with little if any reference to the 'care' that young children and working families need.

BC Child Care is in Crisis

It is no surprise that child care in BC is in crisis. In fact, we expect that based on what you hear from your own constituents – you know that we are not crying wolf.

On 3 key measures – child care in BC is moving backwards.

1. **Parent fees are up.** From 2001 to 2006, average annual child care fees for pre-school aged children in BC went up by \$672. For school-aged care, the increase was more than \$800. In the City of Vancouver, child care fees often top \$1000 per month for infants and toddlers.
2. **Wait lists are long and growing.** BC only has regulated spaces for around 15% of the children in our province and waiting lists, especially for infants and toddlers, can be years long. Recent media reports also highlight the shortage of before and after school spaces. The 2,200 promised new spaces that federal transfer payments are helping to fund won't close the gap – especially given that without adequate support existing spaces continue to close.
3. **Wages remain at poverty levels.** In 2006, the median gross hourly wage for BC's college-trained caregivers in group child care centres was only \$12.58. For many caregivers, wages have in fact gone down. Early Childhood Educators are leaving the field for jobs where they can earn enough to raise their own families, making it even more difficult for communities to provide quality care.

Children, families and child care providers are paying the price of failed policies. Their sacrifices are part of the hidden cost of BC's current economic strength.

There Are Solutions

The good news is that there are solutions. The child care crisis can be solved if BC makes a commitment to:

1. **Build a child care system based on sound policies.** The current examination of expanded early learning programs for young children indicates that BC may now recognize that the founding principles of our public education system – legislated entitlement, universality, and public funding – are equally important to sound public policy for younger children.
2. **Enshrine universal entitlement for young children.** Just as every child has the right to attend school, it's time to ensure that every child also has the right to access a high quality, regulated, child care space if their family wants or need it.
3. **End the false divide between early learning and care.** BC currently separates its policy, planning and funding of 'early learning' programs from its approach to child care. This does not meet the developmental needs of young children or the needs of BC working families. It's time to end the divide and build a truly integrated system of early learning and care.
4. **Provide adequate, sustained public funding.** In a publicly funded child care system, parent fees could be a fraction of what they are now, and child care workers could earn a living wage.

Others do it – we can too.

Canada's shameful record on child care record has been well documented. The OECD reports that Canada still spends less on early childhood education and care services than 13 other developed countries. And, Canadian children still have less access to early childhood education and care services than those in 19 other countries.

These jurisdictions recognize that investing in young children is sound economic and social policy. They recognize that investing in child care:

- Promotes healthy child development.
- Reduces the cost of education, health, criminal justice, social services and income assistance costs down the road.
- Supports labour force attachment and productivity.
- Builds strong, inclusive communities.

We agree with BC's Budget 2009 Consultation Paper that it is about choices.

Here are ours:

1. BC can maintain a strong economy by investing in quality, affordable child care. Given the current economic uncertainty, some will likely say that we can't afford child care. But, BC still has the fiscal capacity to build the child care system we need. Now more than ever, continued economic strength depends on a substantial investment in child care.
2. BC can better support communities by investing in quality, affordable child care services. This creates local jobs, generates local spending, makes it possible for communities to attract and keep young families and builds social cohesion.
3. Our choice for shaping BC's future is to put the needs of young children at the top of the agenda and ensure that they get the best possible start by investing in quality child care programs.

BC has the strength and capacity to get the job done. Now – let's get on with it.