



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

September 30, 2013

## Manitoba Needs a Public Childcare System

**O**n September 19, Manitoba launched an on-line consultation on the province's next multi-year plan for childcare. Since 2002, Manitoba has had two five-year plans, each of which made incremental changes. A major redesign of childcare is long overdue. In 1890, the province began building public education, moving past one-room schoolhouses to create a public school system. The same transformation needs to happen today for childcare.

Manitobans can be proud of some positive changes that have occurred since 2002. For example, the 2013-14 budget for childcare is \$147.2 million – almost triple what it was in 1999. The number of licensed centre and family home spaces has increased; wages for early childhood educators have risen somewhat; and enhanced quality measures have been put in place.

Nevertheless, Manitoba's childcare system still has miles to go. Between 2009-2012, the number of children 0-5 years grew from 77,000 to 89,000 – a jump of 12,000 youngsters. Most of them have mothers who are in the labour force. Growth in childcare has not kept pace. During that time, the proportion of children aged 0-5 years for whom there was a licensed childcare space (called the "coverage rate") actually dropped slightly. From a longer-term perspective, the increase in coverage has been agonizingly slow: in 2001, the coverage rate for 0-5 year olds was 17.9%; today it is just 20.5% -- meaning Manitoba has a licensed childcare space for only one in five children who needs care. Latest figures show 11,415 names on the

province's centralized waiting list registry.

After many years of stability, parent fees have recently gone up. While Manitoba's parent fees are the second lowest in Canada (after Quebec's famous \$7 day/childcare program), they are still high – regularly costing more than a monthly mortgage, and often more than annual university tuition. Very low-income parents may qualify for a fee subsidy, but the percentage of families receiving subsidy has plummeted. In 2001/02, 47% of children received a subsidy – today, just 29% of enrolled children receive one.

Over one-third of Manitoba's childcare centres operates with an exemption to their license because enough trained staff cannot be recruited and retained. Early childhood educator wages and benefits are low. Quality for children and families suffers when turnover is high.

Recently, Manitoba has seen a small growth spurt in commercial childcare. Kids & Co, for example, is a Canadian franchise that started providing services to a restrictive Winnipeg clientele in 2012. Kids & Co charges \$70/day for infant care (more than double the \$30/day typically charged). Another commercial centre, Advantage Child Care Academy, opened this year in Winnipeg's south end.

Manitoba has few spaces, high fees, and restrictive eligibility for fee subsidy alongside major challenges in recruiting,

there is an alternative.

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retaining and remunerating early childhood educators. Corporate childcare chains are moving in. The cause of this crisis is the provincial policy architecture. Almost all of Manitoba's childcare centres are individually owned and operated by parent volunteer boards of directors. Not-for-profit childcare is much preferable to for-profit childcare for many reasons, including quality of care for children and staff. Nevertheless, voluntary sector childcare is a poor foundation for building province-wide services.

Contemporary families are very different from in those the early 1970s when the "daycare" program (as it was called then) was started. Today's mothers of young children are employed – 74% of Manitoba mothers of preschool children are in the labour force. Good childcare helps mothers (and fathers) work and study while also supporting young children's development. Economic studies have shown that investing in childcare more than pays for itself. Nobel-prize winning economist James Heckman points out that childcare "is a rare public policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large." Moreover, with the high rate of child poverty amongst Aboriginal children (56% compared to 19% in the general population), childcare for Aboriginal children is critical to breaking the cycle of poverty.

Manitoba needs to redesign childcare – but no concrete proposals have been put on the table. Jennifer Howard, Minister of Family Services and Labour, could propose a new way of organizing childcare. She could lay out a plan to integrate early childhood education and care in a single system that is publicly funded and delivered. In a public system, childcare facilities would receive direct funding, meaning parent fees would stop being the primary source of income. This would make care affordable to everyone. A public system would mean early childhood educators received fair wages and working conditions.

A public system can deliver high quality programs through planning, target-setting, accountability, quality improvement and evaluation.

Many industrialized countries already successfully blend early childhood education and childcare – and international research shows these systems work much better than relying on volunteers to run an essential program. The single best way to improve childcare for Manitoba's children and families is to build a public childcare system.

Information on the Public Consultation on Early Learning and Child Care in Manitoba – What Matters to You?

<http://www.manitoba.ca/fs/childcare/consultation.html>

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