



Saskatchewan's Failing Report Card on Child Care

By Courtney Carlberg and Jen Budney



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Saskatchewan Office
2138 McIntyre Street, 2nd Floor
Regina, SK S4P 2R7

www.policyalternatives.ca

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About the Authors

Courtney Carlberg recently graduated with her Masters of Arts in Sociology from the University of Saskatchewan. She works part-time as Research Coordinator in the College of Nursing and serves as Treasurer for Spadina Early Learning and Childcare Co-operative in Saskatoon. She thanks Dr. Terry Wotherspoon, Dr. Judith Martin and Dr. Elizabeth Quinlan, who served on her thesis committee.

Jen Budney is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan. She is also Chair of the Board of Spadina Early Learning and Childcare Co-operative, Saskatoon's oldest licensed child care centre, with four locations serving the city's central neighbourhoods. She thanks Colleen Christopherson-Cote for her work with the Saskatoon Early Years Partnership and the Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership, and for the insights she offered to the authors of this paper.

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Executive Summary

Canada ranks very poorly amongst peer nations for overall quality measures and rates of access to regulated child care, and Saskatchewan ranks the lowest of all Canadian provinces. Since child care policy was introduced in Saskatchewan in 1969, it has been developed in a piecemeal fashion by a series of Liberal, NDP, Conservative, and Saskatchewan Party governments. The resulting system fails to meet the needs of 21st century families and penalizes the province's most vulnerable. Licensed child care in Saskatchewan can accommodate only 18 percent of children aged 5 and under, but 70 percent of Saskatchewan mothers of children aged 5 and under go to work. This means that most children in Saskatchewan are left in the care of extended family members or in unlicensed family child care homes, where they do not benefit from provincial funding or any form of assistance that may accompany regular oversight.

This study examines Saskatchewan's historical approach to child care. It reviews the consequences of the province's neglect of this area and asks why successive governments have remained so reluctant to invest in affordable, flexible, and quality care programs for its youngest constituents. It demonstrates that all families struggle under the current child care paradigm, but those most negatively affected include families living in rural and remote areas, Indigenous families, single parents, parents working shift work, contract work, and seasonally, and low-income families generally.

Child care provision is not a partisan issue, as every governing party has paid it inadequate

attention. The Liberals, NDP, Conservatives, and Saskatchewan Party have all approached child care policy under the basic assumption that child care is primarily a matter of private family responsibility, to be resolved through existing market mechanisms. Demand-side subsidies have been provided only to low income parents, a notion that assumes that middle-class children and children who are disadvantaged have fundamentally different developmental needs. Furthermore, household income levels eligible for subsidy, which were already considerably lower than the Canada Assistance Plan guidelines, were frozen in the 1980s. This means that many families today—even many living below the poverty line—are too “rich” for assistance and too poor to pay for licensed child care.

We make several policy recommendations for improving child care in Saskatchewan, underlining that the child care system is complex and requires a flexible approach, providing not only appropriate spaces but qualified and properly remunerated educators and caregivers, adequate operational funds, and administrative systems that do not punish the province's most vulnerable. Furthermore, we argue that the question of regulated child care provision must be reframed away from an exclusive economic argument (with a focus on increasing female labour force participation) to consider equally the challenge of creating equitable learning and development opportunities for young children as part of an effort to equalize long-term opportunities and life outcomes for all Saskatchewan residents.

Saskatchewan's Failing Report Card on Child Care

Among its peer nations, Canada ranks very poorly on child care benchmarks—second last of all OECD countries, behind the US, along with nations like Mexico, the Republic of Korea, and Hungary (Adamson 2008). Within Canada, Saskatchewan ranks the lowest of all Canadian provinces for overall quality measures and rates of access to regulated child care (Adamson 2008; Pasolli and Young 2012). Across the country, there are only enough licensed facilities to accommodate 24.5 percent of children ages 5 and under, and while PEI and Quebec accommodate more than 30 percent of children, Saskatchewan can accommodate only 18 percent (Macdonald 2018). Child care workers in Saskatchewan are also paid less and have less training in Early Childhood Education than child care workers in all other provinces except Alberta (Pasolli and Young 2012). Meanwhile, more than 70 percent of Saskatchewan mothers of children between the ages of 0 and 5 participate in the workforce (Macdonald 2018). This means that most children in Saskatchewan are left in the care of extended family members or in unlicensed family child care homes, where they do not benefit from provincial funding or any form of assistance that may accompany regular oversight.

This study examines Saskatchewan's historical approach to regulated child care policy and programs development. It reviews the consequences of the province's neglect of this sector and asks why successive governments have remained so reluctant to invest in quality care programs for its youngest constituents. It further demonstrates that the question of child care provision is not a partisan issue, as Liberal,

NDP, Conservative, and Saskatchewan Party governments have all paid inadequate attention to the topic. This study puts the Saskatchewan landscape of child care and early education in national and international comparative contexts, and asks, by way of assessment against other jurisdictions, what Saskatchewan needs to do to bring its child care programs and policies on par with international standards.

Certain demographics are more adversely affected by Saskatchewan's lack of quality child care programs. These include families living in rural and remote areas, urban Indigenous families, and low-income families generally. This is not a small minority: a recent report from the Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina (Hunter and Sanchez 2018) reveals a child poverty rate in the province of 27.6 percent, significantly higher than the national average of 19.6 percent (and third highest in the country after Manitoba and Nunavut). A report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (Macdonald 2018) noted that the entire city of Saskatoon is a "child care desert"—defined as a postal code area with at least three children in competition for each licensed space—and Saskatoon has the lowest average child care coverage of all Canadian cities. Still, within this child care desert, high income families have more and better options.

This report makes several policy recommendations for improving child care in Saskatchewan, underlining that the child care system is complex and requires a flexible approach, providing not only appropriate spaces but qualified and properly remunerated educators and caregivers, adequate operational funds, and administrative

systems that do not punish the province's most vulnerable. Furthermore, the authors of this report argue that the question of regulated child care provision must be reframed away from an exclusive economic argument (with a focus on increasing female labour force participation) to consider equally the challenge of creating equitable learning and development opportunities for young children as part of an effort to equalize long-term opportunities and life outcomes for all Saskatchewan residents.

Improving equitable access to child care in Saskatchewan will require a long-term vision, one which focuses not only on the price and availability of licensed spaces, but on the training and respect for early childhood educators, and on systems of childcare delivery that make it easy for parents and licensed child care operations to work together in the care of children. Smart public policy and the ongoing commitment of successive provincial governments will be essential in this endeavour.

Child Care in Saskatchewan: An Historical Perspective

The Canadian constitution assigns provinces exclusive authority in areas of social policy, which means that child care policies and procedures vary widely from province to province. Nearly everywhere until the mid-1960s, child care provision had remained primarily the concern of women's groups and charities, but in the 1960s the issue of affordable, licensed, and accessible quality child care emerged as a national political discussion. In 1966, with the introduction of the Canada Assistance Plan, the federal government entered into 50/50 cost sharing agreements with the provinces for welfare services, including child care for the poor, and provincial and territorial governments began to introduce legislation to develop and fund different forms of licensed child care (Pasolli and Young 2012).

In 1969, under Liberal Premier Ross Thatcher, Saskatchewan introduced its first child care policy. Section 66 under the *Child Welfare Act*

established child care on the basis of a selectively subsidized user-fee service (Martin 1988). This policy framed child care as a private family matter and the sole responsibility of parents and guardians unless they were financially incapable of paying for services—a framing that persists to the present day. It also established minimum regulations for the government to license and monitor both non-profit and privately-owned child care centres (Martin 1988). The Liberals were slow to advance child care in Saskatchewan: by 1971, only 636 licensed child care spaces had been developed, and several original legislations designed to ensure quality of care (from hot meal provision to the requirement of non-profit status) had been withdrawn, leaving Saskatchewan child care with “minimal standards” (Martin 2001).

Under Premier Allan Blakeney, the NDP expanded the number of licensed spaces in the province and enhanced public spending on child

care through the provision of start-up funds and selective subsidies (Martin 1988). These gains came only with a great deal of urging by child care advocates. It was the Saskatoon Daycare Development Committee that pressured the reluctant NDP to bring in the new child care policy in 1974 (Martin 2001). The 1974 *Family Services Act* included an increase in funding for child care from \$100,000 to \$1.7 million (although less than half of this was spent), an increase in subsidies, eligibility levels, and start-up funds, and a provision for family child care homes. It also established non-profit, parent-controlled centres as the major delivery mechanism for child care (Martin 2001), which has resulted in the prevalence of the non-profit consumer co-operative model in Saskatchewan. As well, the NDP established Saskatchewan's first two-year diploma program in Early Childhood Development (Martin 1988). However, the NDP did not move away from the basic assumption of the Liberals, which was that child care is primarily a matter of private family responsibility, to be resolved through existing market mechanisms, with demand-side subsidies provided only to low income parents—an assumption that, among other things, reinforces the notion that middle-class children and children who are perceived to be disadvantaged have fundamentally different developmental needs. When the NDP departed in 1982, 82 percent of its child care budget was being spent on subsidies for selective purchasers of child care (Martin 1988).

Action Child Care (ACC) emerged in 1979 as a community-based advocacy group calling for a flexible and comprehensive system of child care and parent support policies (Martin 1988). Within its first year, ACC successfully pressured the government to increase the provincial child care budget from \$1.3 million in 1978 to \$2.1 million in 1979, increase the number of licensed spaces, and legislate higher standards of care (Martin 1988). Nonetheless, the NDP

continued to promote the selectively-subsidized, user-pay approach to child care. From 1982 to 1991, under Grant Devine's Progressive Conservative government, progress on child care policies and programs was effectively stalled or pushed back. Income levels eligible for subsidy, which were already considerably lower than the Canada Assistance Plan guidelines, were frozen in 1982, and since then have not increased with inflation (Beach and Friendly 2005). The ACC ceased operating in 1988 and no strong voice or single organization emerged to take its place in advocating for quality child care in Saskatchewan. Successive governments, including the NDP, have responded by paying little attention to the issue.

During the 1990s, with the exception of Quebec, growth in early childhood services slowed across Canada, despite profound economic and social changes that adversely affected the ability of parents to support the early development and education of their children (Penn et al. 2003). When the Saskatchewan NDP returned to power at the end of 1991, they began to increase the supply of licensed child care spaces, but they did so sluggishly, averaging only 124 new spaces across the province each year, or a total increase of less than 1,500 regulated spaces over a dozen years (Friendly 2005). Indeed, under the NDP throughout the 1990s, Saskatchewan remained one of Canada's lowest spenders per child aged 0-12 in terms of overall child care financing (Friendly 2005). While there were marginal increases in spaces, grants for special needs programs, and wage enhancement initiatives, these did little to bring the quality or accessibility of child care in Saskatchewan up to the national average, let alone in line with international standards.

In the early 2000s, the NDP government permitted the establishment of for-profit child care centres, but with the stipulation that they were to be ineligible for any form of government

funding, such as start-up, operating, nutrition, and equipment grants or demand-side subsidies for attending children. Perhaps as a result, today 99 percent of all licensed early learning and child care centres in Saskatchewan remain not-for-profit (Friendly et al. 2015), an outcome that aligns with arguments by child care activists that not-for-profit services provide higher quality care. However, in all other provinces, governments provide subsidies to children attending licensed for-profit centres as well (Beach and Friendly 2005), which arguably encourages the development of a greater number of licensed child care spaces.

Saskatchewan continues to have the lowest rates of access to quality, regulated child care of all Canadian provinces and territories, the second-lowest rates and levels of training for child care staff, and the second-lowest salaries (Pasolli and Young 2012). Sadly, Canada as a nation ranks poorly (24th out of 25) in comparison to peer nations in the provision of quality child care. It is one of only three developed peer nations that meet fewer than three of the ten OECD benchmarks or minimum standards of child care by which the rights of young children might be protected (in fact, it meets only one) (Adamson 2008). The benchmarks explicitly involving child care policies and programs that Saskatchewan, like Canada overall, fails to meet include: provision of spaces for at least 25 percent of children aged 0-3; provision of spaces for at least 80 percent of 4-year-olds; a minimum proportion of staff with training and higher level education; and a minimum level of public funding (Adamson 2008). In 2004, the OECD called on Canadian provinces to develop comprehensive strategic plans for early childhood services, including clear goals, annual service targets, agreed outcomes, and funding guidelines (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2004). While no province has yet met the OECD's recommended benchmarks, other provinces, including Quebec, Manitoba, Ontario, Prince

Edward Island, and Alberta, have made more progress than Saskatchewan (The Muttart Foundation 2013).

The piecemeal approach to child care development in Saskatchewan is reflected in the history of dispersion of child care policies across different departments of the provincial government. When child care was first introduced in 1969, the Ministry of Social Services was responsible for the development of its policies and funding. Until 2006, it continued to be moved between different departments within the Ministry of Social Services to fulfill an indirect mandate. Rather than being a service to benefit all children and families, licensed child care was conceived as a piece of a puzzle to assist parents in getting off of government assistance by allowing them to participate in the workforce. This continues to seem to be the rationale for subsidies today, despite the lack of evidence of any effectiveness. Finally, in 2006, under NDP Premier Lorne Calvert, Saskatchewan became Canada's first province to move the responsibility of early learning and child care programs and policy development from the Ministry of Social Services (Department of Community Resources) to the Ministry of Education (Department of Learning). This, along with increasing the educational requirements for early childhood educators, seemed to constitute an important step in shifting the perspective on child care from one of welfare to one of education. The majority of provincial and territorial governments followed in shifting early learning and child care to their educational departments. However, especially in Saskatchewan, there continues to be a lack of policy focus on the social function of quality child care and hence the purpose and targets of child care funding. Licensed child care centres in Saskatchewan are inspected only twice yearly to ensure that they meet the minimum acceptable standards of child care. There are no incentives provided for centres to do better than this.

In the past decade, under the Saskatchewan Party, the provincial government has modestly increased its public investments in early childhood education, and last year it created 810 new spaces for child care, in line with goals described within the *Early Years Plan 2016-2020* (Government of Saskatchewan 2016).



The recently signed Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement promises to create an additional 2,500 licensed child care spaces in the province by 2020 (Saskatchewan 2018), but this will still leave the province falling far short of OECD standards for child care availability. The *Early Years Plan* aims to “simplify the child care subsidy process for parents” (Government of Saskatchewan 2016)—a system that is hopelessly inefficient, unable to cope with a wide range of issues, such as parents on contract work, and punitive to both low-income working parents and child care centres serving low-income communities (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2004). However, it outlines no strategies for achieving this goal and thus far no initiatives have been introduced. Saskatchewan’s child care policy continues to be piecemeal, without focus, and based on outdated and inaccurate family models in which one parent (the father) goes to work and the other (the mother) stays at home. This model no longer serves the people of Saskatchewan, and its costs—both economic and social—are lasting.

Left: The Government of Saskatchewan’s Early Years Plan released in May of 2016

Who Suffers Under the Current Child Care Paradigm?

The issue of child care has typically been framed in terms of the benefits of boosting women’s labour force participation through the provision of more and better child care access and affordability. Of course, this is an important consideration, as women are half of the potential workforce. A 2018 report by McKinsey & Company asserts that simply raising women’s participation rate from 61 to 64 percent would boost Canada’s national income by \$63-billion by 2026 (Thomas et al. 2018). Providing affordable, high-quality child care should be a core component of any strategy to grow the economy. Beyond the economic rationale, increasing women’s labour force participation is also viewed by many as a cornerstone to achieving gender equality.

The case for a quality universal child care program is also frequently made in terms of the benefits to living standards it would bring to average and low-income families. The income cut-offs for child care fee subsidies in Saskatchewan, which have not been adjusted since the 1980s, are extremely low. In Saskatoon, the current cut-off for maximum subsidy (covering 90 percent of fees) for a two-parent family with two children is \$1,740 per month or \$20,880 per year, an income that is 50 percent **lower** than the Census Family Low Income Measure, After Tax, of \$40,848 for the same family (Statistics Canada, 2017). Households with incomes greater than \$20,880 may still be eligible for partial subsidies, but for most low-income households, licensed child care is simply unaffordable (see Figure 1). As Macdonald and Klinger (2015) demonstrate, a family earning \$30,480 with one preschool child and one school age child (the latter paying only part-time fees for before- and after-school care) would still have to pay \$20.74 per day for

child care in Saskatoon, or roughly \$5,000 per year—approximately 16 percent of the family’s total income.

Figure 1. Gross Income Eligibility for Maximum Child Care Subsidy (Parent Pays 10 Percent of Child Care Fee), Regina, Saskatoon, and Communities in the Northern Administration Districts, 2018

Number of Children in Family	Gross Income Limit for Maximum Subsidy
1	\$19,680
2	\$20,880
3	\$22,080
4	\$23,280

Beyond these important concerns, however, there is the issue of child welfare across all demographics and regions, which does not receive adequate attention in the policy literature. Although Saskatchewan is rapidly urbanizing, over 30 percent of the province’s children aged 0-14 live in rural areas (Friendly et al. 2016). Families living in rural areas, particularly in the north, have an especially difficult time accessing child care, due to low population densities and the prevalence of non-standard hours and seasonal work, which pose challenges for both parents and service providers. Finding a retaining qualified staff is also significantly harder in rural, remote, and northern areas (Friendly et al. 2016). As a result, in the Northern Saskatchewan Administrative District, which accounts for half the province’s land mass but less than 4 percent of the population, there are only 11 child care centres. There are fewer than 100 centres across all rural communities (Friendly et al. 2016).

In a province where more than a quarter of the children live in poverty, it bears underscoring the negative impacts of the lack of affordable, quality licensed child care on the province's most vulnerable: children aged 0-5. A high quality, universal child care program could help many of Saskatchewan's low-income families gain more financial stability, providing parents and caregivers with the freedom they need to acquire job training and find employment. This will not only improve the families' standards of living, but quality early child care and early learning programs could dramatically improve the children's long-term prospects for learning and socialization.

It is by now well-established that the years from birth to age 5 are a critical period for developing the foundations for thinking, behaving, and emotional wellbeing—it is during these years that children develop the cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social, and regulatory skills that predict their later performance in many areas (Trawick-Smith 2013). But children who are economically disadvantaged tend to have less access to books, educational games, and toys in their homes, fewer opportunities for out-of-home educational experiences, and more qualitative limitations or gaps, such as behaviour modeling (Brophy 2006). As a result, economically disadvantaged children often come to kindergarten with limited readiness for school activities in quantitative and qualitative ways. Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that this has lasting negative impacts on their long-term achievement, grade retention, need for special education, attitudes toward school, discipline referrals, high school graduation, and socialization (Bakken, Brown, and Downing 2017; Watts et al. 2018). In other words, the lack of a high quality, universal child care program contributes to social inequality as well as to social immobility.

The government of Saskatchewan does not license or fund on-reserve child care programs (which provide just over 1,100 spaces), as these are regulated by the First Nations themselves

(Human Resources and Skills Development Canada 2013). However, all levels of government have been called on by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in the 3rd Call to Action to uphold Jordan's Principle, that is, to make sure all First Nations children can access the products, services, and supports they need, when they need them. In the absence of federal attention to the issue, there is no reason why the province should not collaborate with First Nations to improve on-reserve child care. Furthermore, the province has clear responsibilities for childcare for the children of First Nations families who live off-reserve, and who constitute approximately 50 percent of the total First Nations population. The most recent statistics show that 40 percent of people with First Nations identity who live off-reserve reside in low-income households (in contrast to 18 percent for Metis people and 11 percent for people reporting a non-Indigenous identity) (Gingrich 2016). The Indigenous population is on average a decade younger than the non-Indigenous population, and also growing at a faster rate; approximately 3 in 10 Saskatchewan children are Indigenous (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada 2012). It follows that the majority of children living in poverty in Saskatchewan are Indigenous, both on- and off-reserve. The TRC's 7th Call to Action is "to develop with Aboriginal groups a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians" and its 12th Call to Action is for "federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2012). The research on the benefits of quality, licensed childcare would indicate that fulfilling the Call to Action on early childhood education is a necessary step in achieving the long-term goal of eliminating educational and employment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens.

For a Brighter Future

As this report has outlined, Saskatchewan's historical approach to regulated child care policy is piecemeal, outdated, and fails to meet the needs of most families. Saskatchewan's child care system is among the weakest in the country, with its policies and programs falling far short of international standards. Low-income, Indigenous, single-parent, and rural families suffer the most in the system, and child-care centres serving low-income and rural communities also face many challenges related to under-funding and the inefficient demand-side subsidy program. The authors of this report make several recommendations for improving—and ultimately overhauling—the broken child care system in Saskatchewan. Early learning and child care policies are complex with a number of interrelated factors impacting their development and success. These recommendations must all be implemented to build an effective early learning and child care system in Saskatchewan.

First, the government must work with major stakeholder groups to develop a holistic early childhood education and care strategy. The *Early Years Plan 2016-2020*, released in May 2016, does not form such a strategy. While some goals are outlined in this plan, the document contains no concrete plans or policies, no clear targets for the development of child care spaces, no guaranteed budgets, and no measures of evaluation. The OECD's 2004 recommendations for Canadian provinces and territories to develop clear, comprehensive strategies for their child care and early childhood education policies underscored the need for clear priority targets, benchmarks, guaranteed budgets, and timelines (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2004). Saskatchewan must fulfil these obligations as a starting point for child

care reform, as only a robust, holistic strategy document, created in partnership with major stakeholders—including child care centre directors, Indigenous child advocates, and poverty reduction leaders—will provide a base for evaluation and reflect the most current knowledge and evidence for high quality child care.

Second, the Government of Saskatchewan must move responsibility for all child care and early learning policies to a single ministry, which was also recommended by the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2004). Currently, responsibility for funding, policy development, and licensing of child care facilities falls to the Ministry of Education, Early Years Branch, while the Ministry of Social Services is responsible for child care subsidies to eligible parents and guardians. The demand-side subsidy policy, where child care centres are reimbursed only after parents pay their portion of the monthly fees, combined with the lack of streamlined communication between those responsible for issuing subsidies and those responsible for overseeing child care, is slow, inefficient, and difficult to access for the low-income parents and caregivers that it is supposed to serve (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2004). Placing all responsibility for child care and early learning under the Early Years Branch of the Ministry of Education, so that holistic reform might take place, is an essential step towards improving the subsidy system and child care access for low-income families.

Third, a new child care strategy must consider the training and remuneration of qualified staff. Saskatchewan should draw lessons from other provinces (Quebec and Prince Edward Island) that have implemented mandatory wages for early childhood educators and early

childhood assistants (Flanagan and Beach 2016) in order to insure that all child care workers are paid a living wage and receive consistent pay increases indexed to levels of education, years of experience, and inflation. It has been clearly demonstrated that proper remuneration of staff and good working conditions are predictors of quality child care (Doherty et al. 2000; Flanagan, Beach, and Varmuza 2012), and that Canadian child care workers, most of whom are women, are grossly underpaid, which makes it difficult for centres to recruit and retain qualified staff (Prentice 2009; Doherty, Friendly, and Beach 2003; Goelman et al. 2006). The low salaries paid to child care workers, relative to teachers, reflect the distinction that governments make between programs that are viewed as primarily educational (such as kindergarten) and child care programs whose primary role is thought to be on par with “babysitting.” As a result of the low status given to the important work of child care and early childhood education, Saskatchewan Polytechnic campuses in Prince Albert, Saskatoon, and Regina are struggling to graduate an adequate supply of qualified early childhood educators (Mills 2017). Furthermore, among those who graduate, Indigenous child care workers are underrepresented (Doherty, Friendly, and Beach 2003). For an expanded, quality child care system to succeed in Saskatchewan, the government must work not only with the Polytechnic but also with an array of representatives from the child care sector, along with Indigenous child advocates and educators, to create a strategy for increasing the salaries and educating more, and more culturally representative, qualified and motivated early childhood educators. Standards and curricula for the education of child care workers also must be improved, in keeping with higher salary expectations.

Fourth, the Province must act quickly to make child care more affordable. As a first and immediate step, Saskatchewan’s subsidy

eligibility criteria need to be brought up-to-date. Since child care policy was first introduced in Saskatchewan, the province has maintained the cumbersome demand-side subsidy scheme to assist lower earning families, with subsidy eligibility determined by a gross income threshold assessment. However, the cut-off for maximum subsidy (covering 90 percent of fees) for a two-parent family with two children is \$1,740/month or \$20,880 (gross) per year, has not been increased since the 1980s. If this income threshold were adjusted for inflation, families earning less than \$49,248 today would be eligible for full subsidies, with partial subsidies available on a sliding scale for families with incomes higher than this. Child care subsidies should also be made available to those employed in shift and weekend work, and those living in remote or rural areas, who pay for unlicensed private child care because of the absence of 24/7 licensed non-profit services.

Ultimately, the subsidy system requires a total overhaul and possible replacement with a new system, such as a set parent fee schedule, which has resulted in lower fees for families in provinces using this system (Quebec, Manitoba, and PEI) (Macdonald and Friendly 2017). Another path to investigate is an annual subsidy guarantee tied to each family’s net income as shown on their previous year’s tax returns. The current monthly reporting system punishes low-income parents, including parents on assistance, if they show initiative by taking on even minimal additional hourly or contract work. It also generates an inordinate amount of paperwork along with payment delays and non-payments for child care centres serving low income communities.

Fifth, the government must begin gathering continuous and up-to-date data and make this data available to the public, researchers, professional organizations, and advocacy groups. There is simply not enough data on child care access, quality measures, child outcomes and

family impacts, or program characteristics in Saskatchewan, as reports from the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Services cover only annual expenditures on operational grants, remuneration, and demand-side subsidies, as well as the number of licensed child care spaces in the province. A coordinated, considered, responsive, and accountable child care system must rely on sound information about the system's size and scope, its impact on the children and families it serves, the number of families seeking a licensed space, the effectiveness and efficiency of investments in the system, human resource needs and issues, areas for improvement, and plans for sustainability (Flanagan and Beach 2016). An accreditation program, similar to that used in Alberta, which scores and rewards centres on four standards—outcomes for children, outcomes for families, outcomes for staff, and outcomes for communities—would greatly improve the monitoring and development of programs and policies (Government of Alberta 2017). The posting of results, as also happens in Alberta, would ensure accountability to the public. The Multilateral and Early Learning and Child Care Framework (Employment and Social Development Canada 2017) states that provincial and territorial governments shall work together to improve data collection and dissemination on key early learning and child care information. For the data to be meaningful and have impact, it must be selected and gathered in consultation with stakeholders. To kickstart this work, a province-wide study to determine the need and demand for child care, along with perceptions of barriers and other family concerns, could be implemented rather quickly. Municipal and regional child care centre wait lists could also be quickly established, with financial and administrative assistance from the provincial government. This would create an up-to-date record of child care demand and assist in determining the numbers and locations of spaces that must be established. It would also help the province and Saskatchewan Polytechnic

to determine if the province is generating an adequate supply of qualified child care workers.

Finally, the importance of building in flexibility to a new system cannot be overstated. The days in which most households had two parents with a single breadwinner working 9 to 5 are long over. A twenty-first century child care system must acknowledge the reality of shift work, contract work, seasonal work, and single parents, along with the obligation to respect the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call for culturally appropriate early learning facilities for Indigenous children. Such a child care system will not be limited to institutionalized settings but will embrace a variety of organizational forms and child care arrangements.

In order to support the above initiatives, **Saskatchewan must begin funding the child care sector appropriately.** In 2016-2017, the province spent \$66.75 million on child care for children aged 0-5, inclusive of operation grants and subsidies (Government of Saskatchewan 2017b; Government of Saskatchewan 2017a). This is just 0.11 percent of the province's GDP. The OECD and UNICEF, however, recommend that governments spend a minimum of 0.7 percent of their GDP on early learning and child care for children aged 0-5 and 1 percent for children aged 0-6 (Bennett 2008; Adamson 2008). 0.7 percent of Saskatchewan's GDP is \$556.59 million. Meeting the international standard for funding, upheld by Iceland, Denmark, Finland, France, and Norway, and nearly matched by many other OECD countries, would require Saskatchewan to add approximately \$490 million dollars to the annual budget for child care for children aged 0-5. A number of studies demonstrate that this level of investment in a quality child care system can potentially pay for itself, through the additional tax revenue and reduced public outlays associated with a higher GDP, along with decreased absenteeism stemming from child care difficulties (Fortin, Godbout, and St-Cerny 2012; Kershaw and Anderson 2010).

Conclusion

Three points bear reiterating from our study of child care in Saskatchewan.

First, Saskatchewan's child care policies and programs fall at the bottom of international standards for wealthy nations upheld by the OECD and UNICEF. Not only does Canada land at 24th out of 25 OECD nations for child care standards, Saskatchewan ranks the lowest of all Canadian provinces for overall quality measures and rates of access to regulated child care. There is nothing to be proud of in this picture.

Child care is not and has never been a partisan issue in the province, as all governments have equally neglected this issue. At the root of Saskatchewan's child care failure is an outdated core belief about family models in which fathers work and mothers stay at home, along with an assumption that middle-class children and children who are disadvantaged have profoundly different developmental needs. In fact, the current system is failing all Saskatchewan families, but certain demographics are more adversely affected: those living in rural and remote areas, Indigenous families, single-parent families, families employed in shift, seasonal, and contract work, and low-income families generally.

Second, the current policy guide, *Early Years Plan 2016-2020*, is a hollow document and will not see through any meaningful reforms to the current child care system. The *Early Years Plan 2016-2020* contains no concrete plans or policies, no clear targets for the development of child care spaces, no guaranteed budgets, and no measures of evaluation. It is time for the government to work in consultation with major stakeholders—child care centres, Indigenous



child advocates, and poverty reduction advocates—to create a comprehensive strategic plan for child care in Saskatchewan that includes clear priority targets, benchmarks, guaranteed budgets, and timelines.

A strategy for an affordable, accessible, and quality child care system will be flexible, not relying on a single organizational model, will include consideration for the training and remuneration of qualified staff, and will be based on up-to-date data that is made available to the public, researchers, and advocacy groups. The government must commit substantially more resources to this sector.

Finally, it is time for us to reframe the question of child care away from an exclusive economic argument, and to put at the heart of child care development the challenge of creating equitable learning and development opportunities for all babies and small children in Saskatchewan. We know now that the early years create the foundation for life-long learning and socialization. Investment in child care today creates long-term opportunities and enhanced life outcomes for the people of Saskatchewan tomorrow.

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