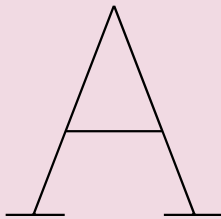




We can't get back to work until child care works

Simon Enoch



As regions around the world prepare to “open” their respective economies, they are quickly realizing that the ability to get people back to work rests on a long invisible and underappreciated but essential service: child care.

One of the more remarkable aspects of the COVID-19 crisis is the way it has revealed just how much we rely on the labour of others. The essential labour of public health workers, grocery store workers, postal carriers, utility workers, long-haul truckers and many others have sustained us to the point that we can even entertain re-opening the economy. But as we've seen, the ability of even these essential workers to do their jobs, often rests on the ability of teachers and child care workers to do theirs. The fact that governments around the world immediately prioritized emergency child care services for other essential workers demonstrates that available child care underpins the ability of much of our economy to properly function.

Here in Saskatchewan, 219,000 workers — roughly 40 percent of the workforce — have children under the age of 18. A large proportion of these workers will not be able to return to work without some form of school or child care — neither of which is set to re-open anytime soon according to the government's reopening plan.

We can announce the economy is open for business until we are blue in the face, but unless parents have somewhere to send their children, those workers aren't going anywhere. Sure, some may be able to continue to work from home, but many others will be faced with the impossible choice of returning to work without sufficient care in place for their children. How many will turn to elderly relatives

for child care, further risking their health, as has happened in Italy and Spain? How will the government support those workers who are recalled to work but have no choice but to remain home because they do not have child care?

The fact that these questions remain unanswered in the wake of the government's reopening plan is disturbing, but not all that surprising. Governments in Saskatchewan — of all political stripes — simply have not seen the need to prioritize affordable and accessible child care in the province, so it is not unexpected that it received such scant attention in the government's reopening plan. As Courtney Carlberg and Jen Budney document, child care in Saskatchewan has always been thought of as primarily the responsibility of the family rather than government. As a result, Saskatchewan ranks the lowest in the country in overall quality measures and rates of access, while our child care workers are some of the lowest-paid in the country.

Yet, as others have observed, it is an open question how much of our currently inadequate child care system in Canada will even survive the COVID-19 crisis. The loss of parent fees — their main source of revenue — without sufficient government relief will see the number of child care spaces shrink even further — at the exact time we are trying to transition people back to work and disproportionately impact women. Equally important is the safety of child care workers. How many will be willing to risk their health to return to a position that is often grossly underpaid and underappreciated — particularly in a profession that was already prone to high rates of turnover?

Many of these issues existed prior to COVID-19, the crisis has — like so much else — rendered them much more visible for all of us to see. If COVID-19 teaches us anything, it is that government's can no longer treat child care as an afterthought. As it becomes increasingly clear that accessible quality child care is the bedrock upon which so much of our economy depends, governments must begin to make investments commensurate with its increasingly visible role as the lynchpin of our economy. We can't get back to work until child care in our country works. ●

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