



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

March 25, 2020

## Pandemic Punctures Childcare Illusion

*First published in the Winnipeg Free Press, March 25, 2020.*

**W**ho knew that childcare would punch through as a key priority in a global pandemic? The illusion that childcare is a simple and private family matter has just been shattered by swiftly-moving events. For years, Canadian governments could treat childcare as a marginal issue of low priority: that consensus is now gone. Just a few days ago, the Winnipeg Free Press rightly editorialized that parents now face “logistical problems” and an “urgent childcare crunch.”

Childcare services are essential for working parents, meaning that what we used to call “daycare” is critical for economic functioning. Yet Manitoba, like nearly all of Canada’s jurisdictions, lacks the practical policy levers and mechanisms to ensure parents have the services they need. We have a space for fewer than one in five children who might need one; over 16,600 names are already on the central registry, waiting for a space.

Why are the policy tools missing? Nearly all centre-based childcare services are delivered by the charitable and voluntary sector, and a smaller number by commercial entrepreneurs. Neither the province, the City of Winnipeg, nor any other level of government directly owns and operates a single childcare space. There is no government role in planning where childcare services open (or close), whether they serve infants or school-agers, whether they operate for a full-day or part-time.

Manitoba provides more operational funding to childcare services than most provinces, but centres are nevertheless financially stretched. By contrast, Quebec has been able to respond much more quickly to the crisis, largely because childcare is better funded and more available.

As nurses, respirologists, physicians, paramedics, midwives, pharmacists, police and fire, first-responders, and others in occupations ranging from grocery checkout clerks to postal workers figure out how to keep going in a pandemic where they are vitally needed, they discover their childcare arrangements are fragile and built on a shaky foundation.

On March 20th, Manitoba announced some measures to try to address the childcare crisis and to ensure public health. One step is \$7.6 million to centres so they can keep up to 16 spaces open, with a first priority to children of healthcare and other essential workers. Although this will barely fund three weeks, it is a short-term lifeline for chronically under-funded centres and their low paid educators.

Gobsmackingly, more than twice as much money is earmarked for care that doesn’t even exist yet. Manitoba is betting more than \$18 million on home-based care that will be created on the fly. The province is hoping that early childhood educators reeling from layoffs will suddenly become

there is an alternative.

CCPA-MB  
301 - 583 Ellice Ave.  
Winnipeg, MB  
R3B 1Z7

phone  
(204) 927-3200

email  
ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

website  
www.policyalternatives.ca/  
manitoba

blog  
www.policyfix.ca

twitter  
@ccpamb

continued..

entrepreneurs and set up home-based businesses. Relying on individual women in their private homes (or sometimes, working as a team of two) – where a variety of family members and other potential virus carriers come and go – to provide a safe public service seems ludicrous. Why set up a parallel system when existing services could – with proper support – be redeployed?

Much better would be to ensure that existing non-profit centres have the funding and support they need to safely care for the children of essential workers. We can turn to the Public Health Office of Canada for urgently needed guidelines about how to safely care for children during a pandemic. Existing licensed and regulated childcare centres and homes already meet provincial licensing, safety, and quality standards. They would nevertheless require a serious infusion of funds to operate safely and sustainably, with drastically lower enrollments, while following public health guidelines. Rather than do this, Family Minister Stefanson has dedicated millions to help the hoped-for new care providers buy “a fire extinguisher or first aid kit,” suggesting just how unprepared these carers will be.

A thousand important operational questions remain unanswered about to safely care for children who need care while also protecting early childhood educators, and ensuring that the whole fragile sector does not collapse. One thing is starkly clear: We cannot expect citizens – nearly always women – to work for scandalously low wages, and in perhaps unsafe conditions, while providing an essential service. This is modern-day piecework as the template for childcare – and it must be rejected.

Manitoba must quickly move into the 21st century of caregiving. We need develop a robust system of public management of childcare programs that are solidly funded. Toronto, for example, with an extensive network of municipally owned and operated childcare centres, is in a much better position to coordinate a city-wide response – something that is simply impossible in Manitoba, given today’s policy architecture.

Most importantly, this crisis makes it clear that we are at the end of the hoary illusion that childcare is just a private matter. For the same reasons we build public services in other sectors, we need to redesign childcare policy. High quality childcare is at the heart of the 21st century economy and modern family realities. Pandemic or not, without this political understanding, we will never implement the policy mechanisms and infrastructure that early learning and childcare requires – neither during this global crisis, nor for the recovery to follow.

*Susan Prentice is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manitoba, where she specializes in childcare policy. She is a CCPA Manitoba research associate.*

**CCPA-MB**  
301-583 Ellice Ave.  
Winnipeg, MB  
R3B 1Z7

**phone**  
(204) 927-3200

**email**  
ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

**website**  
www.policyalternatives.ca/  
manitoba

**blog**  
www.policyfix.ca

**twitter**  
@ccpamb

References available upon request.