

## **EDITORS:**

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**BC's Child Care Crisis**

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### **OVERBLOWN RHETORIC, UNDERFUNDED REALITIES**

**Commentary by First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition**

To listen to the rhetoric from Victoria, you'd think that British Columbia had one of the world's great child care systems.

Minister of State Linda Reid calls child care "one of the most vital resources for B.C.'s parents." She speaks proudly about the steps already taken to provide "the strongest start possible for B.C.'s children." And she talks about achieving the goal of "making B.C. the best place to raise a family."

With all those superlatives, a person might believe that if we have not yet attained heaven on earth, we certainly can't be far away.

Yet the same government "service plan" that contains Reid's flowery language also reveals some alarming realities - if you know where to look.

The province estimates 24,480 families will get full or partial child care subsidies during the current fiscal year. That figure may sound impressive, were it not for the fact that there are an estimated 358,000 BC mothers in the paid labour force with children 12 or younger.

In other words, the subsidy system covers perhaps seven percent of BC mothers who might well be in need of child care for their children.

The service plan also predicts no increase in the number of families getting subsidies next year or even the year after that.

Despite the rhetoric about the importance of child care, government funding for child care and related programs is down from \$535.3 million during the last fiscal year to \$429.9 million this year. That's a loss of \$105.5 million, or nearly 20 percent, for child care, special needs and early childhood development. The BC Liberals blame Canada's new Conservative government for the drop in funding, but the reality is BC could easily have made up the difference out of last year's surplus of \$3.15 billion (yes, billion).

Then there's the issue of capital funding to create more child care spaces in BC. The latest

service plan says “major capital funding” is on hold pending word from Ottawa about the new Conservative government’s not-so-new promise to create 125,000 new child care spaces across the country sometime in the years ahead. Provincial dithering hardly seems to echo their description of child care as a vital resource.

The federal government says money for the 125,000 new spaces will be given directly to the provinces to spend as they see fit. This would be an opportunity for BC to show some leadership and foresight, but it’s hard to be hopeful based on the record to date.

Once you get beyond official government publications, the gap between rhetoric and reality is even more striking.

There is little evidence that Premier Gordon Campbell, Finance Minister Carole Taylor or any of the other heavy hitters in the provincial cabinet have much use for child care. The fact that child care is left to the responsibility of a minister of state - that is, a junior cabinet minister - speaks volumes about the province’s commitment.

There’s also the issue of placing responsibility for child care within the ministry of children and family development, the ministry that is responsible for many thousands of British Columbians with a wide range of special needs. The ministry seems to be in a perpetual state of turmoil and reorganization, and it’s no surprise that child care has trouble holding its own amid all the other demands on resources.

Meanwhile, the ministry of education is gobbling up a slice or two of the early childhood development or early childhood education pies for programs such as StrongStart BC. Just where these other programs are headed or how they may impact child care programs is still not clear, because the province is loathe to share its plans with ordinary British Columbians.

Perhaps the word “plan” is too strong, at least when it comes to child care. Having a plan means having a goal, having detailed ways of meeting that goal, and having a timetable for reaching interim targets along the way. None of this is true in BC.

What we have are small patchwork programs that help some, but not most families with children. We have no firm commitment from the powers that be that child care programming really matters. And the province has essentially put child care policy on hold in the vain hope that substantial sums of new money might eventually be forthcoming from the federal government.

Without doing harm to the English language, it’s impossible to reconcile any of these realities with the public pronouncements from the BC Liberals about how much they care and what a great job they’re doing.