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DON'T LET FEAR OF CHANGE DERAIL MODERNIZING CHILD CARE

Amid the controversy surrounding Nova Scotia's plans to modernize its early-learning and child-care services, at least all sides agree there are problems.

There are not enough licensed programs for young children. Options for families in rural and minority communities, and for children needing special supports are particularly scarce. What programs exist charge more than most parents can afford. Operators have difficulty attracting and keeping staff, and because qualified educators are hard to find, the quality of programming children receive is often substandard.

The depth of the challenges has been documented in consultations and studies conducted by successive governments, academics, unions and child-care organizations. The solutions proposed have also been consistent: more child-care capacity and more money to pay educators are needed. Program leaders want time to focus on supporting their staff and families, rather than being mired in administration and fundraising.

Then in the spring of 2021, the federal budget announced a financial remedy available to the provinces and territories with two broad conditions: reduce parent fees to \$10 a day and expand capacity using non-profit or public providers. Providing jurisdictions tabled plans that met these broad conditions, they received their share of the funding; in Nova Scotia's case, \$605-million over the next five years, with a commitment to add 9,500 new spaces.

The province could layer its new money over old problems, but paying for more administration only gets more administration, not the hands-on leadership needed to improve programming. Expecting providers, battered and left fragile by the pandemic, to add thousands of new spaces may result in more classrooms, but there will be no educators to staff them.

As a native Nova Scotian, I could not be more impressed with the unique and innovative approaches my province is pursuing to tackle these conflicts. Workforce recruitment will be addressed with improved wages and benefits, free tuitions and student bursaries. The government has also devised an ingenious plan to consolidate all the non-learning-and-care aspects of operating child care within a centralized body. An independent organization is being created with the expertise to develop new programs, take on fee collection, waitlist maintenance, payroll, hiring, purchasing and to bring in specialist supports, where required.

It's a cost-effective business model, but more importantly, it frees up operators to focus on their mission to serve children and families. It also promotes equity. Centralized waitlists prevent operators from discriminating against vulnerable families. A common approach to human resources promotes diversity in hiring and can better support staff to do their jobs more effectively.



Yet herein lies the controversy. For operators to receive the funding that will allow them to pay their staff more and charge their parents less, they must belong to the new organization. No operator is compelled to join. Similar to private schools, they are free to operate independently. Also, at issue is who will be allocated new spaces. Some for-profit operators are angry the province hasn't advocated for their inclusion in expansion plans.

This isn't Nova Scotia's decision to make. Like every other jurisdiction that has signed a deal with Ottawa, it agreed to grow child care without profit-making. Behind the federal funding is the intention to create a Canada-wide early-learning and child-care program enshrined in legislation. Just as the creation of universal health care in the 1960s and post-secondary education in the 1970s required severing our reliance on religious, charitable and private organizations to deliver essential services, the same applies to the newly emerging national child-care program.

Like elsewhere, almost as many child-care centres close each year in Nova Scotia as open — a situation that disrupts children, family and communities and squanders public investment. As Premier Tim Houston stressed, the innovations in the government's plan will stabilize child care, allowing for the building of a system that creates careers for educators, opens work opportunities for mothers, provides children with the best possible start in life and draws young families to the province, adding to its economic well-being.

Getting there will require child-care operators to embrace change, but there is far more reason to fear the status quo than joining the solution.



Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain