

REAL QUESTIONS ABOUT UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE

Since the start of the pandemic, calls for universal child care have picked up steam. Before pursuing this policy approach, however, there are important questions to answer. These questions pertain to all aspects of child care—accessibility, quality, and cost. Every family is different, and child care needs and desires vary.

Will a federally funded, universal system be able to meet these needs?

THE QUESTION: SHOULD THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INTRODUCE A NEW CHILD-CARE MODEL IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC?

Canadian federalism empowers the provinces to make decisions that work best in their context. Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy professor Sean Speer writes, “Government policy should seek to leverage the federalist tradition. This means more local experimentation, less central planning, and empowering provincial and local governments to advance provincial and local interests in their respective constitutional spheres without federal meddling or pressure to conform.”¹

Care of our very youngest occurs in the local context, and federal involvement should focus on providing support to enable local communities—starting with parents. Caring for children does take a village, but as the signatories of the report “A Positive Vision for Child Care Policy Across Canada” wrote, the village must be one in which “parents and their children are surrounded by others with whom they feel a real personal connection and in whom they have deep trust. Equating the village with government is neither logical nor reasonable, but this very often is precisely what is done.”² The creation of national daycare, spearheaded by the federal government, may be an attempt to create local “villages” for parents, but this is an unreasonable goal. By design, federal policy is removed from the culture and communities that parents are part of.

What a federal “universal” approach to child care would effectively do is diminish the diversity of various communities in child care. A recent report advocates for using the recent pandemic as a reason to “buy change” in the current child-care landscape.³ The authors recommend swapping the existing ecosystem of care for a federal, nationalized version, which they claim will be more accessible and higher quality. This claim, in a country of Canada’s geographic size and ethnic diversity, is unlikely to be realized. If a local issue is taken up by the level of government furthest from it, the likely result will be a misunderstanding of the community’s needs and increased inefficiency, among other drawbacks.

1. Sean Speer, “Federalism Is a Source of Strength for Canada,” *Huffington Post Canada*, September 30, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/sean-speer/federalism-canada-strength_b_12240822.html.

2. Cardus, “A Positive Vision for Child Care Policy Across Canada,” January 21, 2019, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/family/reports/positive-vision-for-child-care-policy-across-canada/>.

3. Armine Yalnizyan and Kerry McCuaig, “Investing in Early Learning and Child Care,” Atkinson Foundation, September 16, 2020, <https://atkinsonfoundation.ca/atkinson-fellows/posts/investing-in-early-learning-and-child-care/>.



THE TAKEAWAY

Maintaining choice and diversity in child care means allowing local actors independence. Federal jurisdiction over child care is limited. The federal government should therefore remain as flexible as possible in its funding agreements with the provinces, allowing local latitude to decide what works best. To better help families, the federal government should consider child care as the care of a child, no matter who does it. Federal funding for families ensures that the government does not discriminate against any form of child care, including parents and relatives doing child care. Child care is more than spaces in licensed daycare centres.