

# A Public Child Care System: Good for Parents, Children, Workers & the Economy

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**Unifor Submission to the Nova  
Scotia Child Care Review**

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*Thank you goes to the many people who made this submission possible including:*

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Unifor Research Department*

*Lisa Kelly, Director  
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*Susan Gill, President  
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*Lisa Gentile, Chairperson  
Town Day Care, Unifor Local 4600*

*Joanne Kressner, Chairperson  
Peter Pan Day Care, Unifor Local 4600*

*Thank you to our members at Town and Peter Pan Daycare for their tireless efforts and hard work in the child care sector as well as the many parents for their unwaivering support.*



## The Context

The establishment of a review of the regulated child care sector in the province by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is an indication of the government's willingness to improve the system. Unifor supports the Department's stated goals of the review: to make child care more accessible to families, enhance the quality of child care programs and support the development of the child care workforce. With the recommendations from Unifor and community members across the province, the government has an important opportunity to make lasting changes to the child care sector that will improve the lives of families across the province and strengthen the economy.

The benefits of accessible and high-quality child care are well-documented and broadly accepted in Canada. Accessible child care enables parents to work or get the education and training they need to obtain good jobs. Making child care more affordable opens up additional opportunities for so many families who are struggling to get by, improves women's equality and reduces poverty. High-quality care is crucial to the healthy development and well-being of children under care, including care for children with special needs.

Supporting and developing the child care workforce will result in higher-quality services and a more stable workforce. Living wages for child care providers are spent in the community, resulting in a benefit to the local economy.

Investing in child care stimulates the economy and provides significant socio-economic returns to society. Every \$1 spent on child care services increases the GDP by \$2.30 – more than in the construction and manufacturing sectors – while every \$1 million invested in child care creates up to 40 jobs, expands the provincial tax base and boosts our local communities.<sup>1</sup> Child care is not just an important service that families should have available to them, but is an important economic driver that the province should support.



## The Challenges

### Availability of spaces

Families in Nova Scotia are having an increasingly difficult time finding regulated child care spaces for their children. Communities are being underserved in terms of the regulated facilities and spaces that exist and parents are stuck looking for other options while they remain on long waitlists. There are regulated spaces for an estimated 13% of children aged 0-

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Labour Congress. "Budget Watch 2015 Backgrounder." 2015.

12 years and regulated full or part-time centre-based spaces for 23% of children aged 0-5 years in the province.<sup>2</sup>

*As a single parent, I've needed childcare to finish university and to start work. Wait lists for daycares are extensive and discouraging, yet they are the only option for many parents, especially those relying on subsidy.*

*-Samantha Bonaparte, parent, Town Day Care*

In many cases, parents who were looking to rejoin the workforce – the majority of whom are women – have decided instead to delay their re-entry into the workforce to ensure that their children are cared for. This limits parents' ability to pursue their employment goals, but also hampers their short-term and long-term economic prospects.

In other cases, parents rely on unregulated child care facilities, which may be much less affordable and do not operate in accordance with the same provincial regulations. This puts additional financial pressure on parents, while their children may not be receiving the same quality of care compared to regulated or school-board operated facilities.



### Affordability

The cost of child care in the province is largely borne by parents directly through fees. Median daily parent fees in 2012 ranged from \$26 per day to \$36 per day, depending on the age of the children.<sup>3</sup> With parents required to pay up to almost \$800 per month for regulated child care, such services are simply out of reach for many families. The lack of available spaces and the high cost of child care combine to make services less accessible, which disproportionately affects women and low-income families in Nova Scotia.

*Costs of daycares is also a struggle. While in university, daycare fees were a struggle even with subsidy. Once I establish a good job, the subsidy goes so it's still a struggle for a single mom...there is no getting ahead.*

*-Samantha Bonaparte, parent, Town Day Care*

For those who do manage to pay for child care services, they are left to make tough choices. In many cases, child care is the second highest expense after housing for a family. This financial burden prevents parents – especially women – from not only progressing in their careers, but

<sup>2</sup> Childcare Resource & Research Unit and Canadian Union of Postal Workers. "Finding Quality Child Care: A guide for parents in Canada." 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Childcare Resource & Research Unit and Canadian Union of Postal Workers. "Finding Quality Child Care: A guide for parents in Canada." 2015.

from affording other essential needs and even results in taking on more family debt. As a province, we need to ask: Is this fair for Nova Scotia families and what impact does this have on the economic health of our local communities?

Child care affordability and accessibility is also influenced by the structure of the sector. Half of the child care operations are owned by private, for-profit companies.<sup>4</sup> Even if they are regulated, for-profit operations have a primary goal to make money, and thus, are more likely to focus on cutting costs, keeping workers' wages low and increasing parent fees for services. The proliferation and prominence of for-profit operations is further putting child care out of reach, stagnating wages for child care providers and placing a larger financial burden on families with children.

### Quality of care

It is obviously important that child care facilities meet certain standards when trusted to care for children. While the *Day Care Act* and regulations are important in this regard for aspects related to ratios, nutrition, outdoor time, parent involvement and health and safety, among others, they are minimum standards to ensure some level of quality. Child care facilities should be able to go beyond minimum standards and deliver high quality care.

*I can honestly say that all of our staff are there for one reason and one reason only: it's for the love of the children... We service a variety of people in the community and meet many challenges. From single moms or dads trying to get ahead in their life, yes we are there for them...we [provide] an essential service.*

*-Joanne Kressner, Unifor Unit Chair, Peter Pan Day Care*

Many child care facilities, especially those relying on provincial funding, are strapped for resources and cannot reach beyond the minimum standards to do things like hire more staff, incorporate more community involvement, provide more support for children with special needs, boost meal nutrition, improve facility space or develop more effective pedagogical approaches. Children are spending a lot of time under care during a critical developmental period in their lives. They need to be supported with appropriate resources and a learning environment that effectively facilitates healthy development.

### Conditions for workers

It is important to acknowledge that the people supporting the health, development and safety of children in care are the front-line workers. Front-line child care workers face a myriad of challenges in their day-to-day jobs and they should be supported and recognized for that. They play an essential community role with parents, schools and community agencies. Front-line workers like Early Childhood Educators have spent considerable time and resources

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<sup>4</sup> Childcare Resource & Research Unit and Canadian Union of Postal Workers. "Finding Quality Child Care: A guide for parents in Canada." 2015.

obtaining their educational credentials and continuing with ongoing professional development training.

*Once workers graduate and enter the workforce they soon realize [they] can't live on this salary...they are quickly leaving the field for another job. We have dedicated, well-trained, loving ECE's in our province...[we need to] work towards allowing us to remain in our chosen field.*  
-Lisa Gentile, Unifor Unit Chair, Town Day Care

Yet, Early Childhood Educators in Nova Scotia, for example, are the lowest-paid in the country with an average salary that is 22% lower than the national average.<sup>5</sup> Front-line workers are



often expected to be utility players who perform cleaning, maintenance, and kitchen and other duties. They often complete documentation, progress reports and other tasks during their lunch hours or after hours.

Front-line workers are a primary voice in pushing to improve the accessibility and quality of child care in Nova Scotia. However, this can only be done by properly investing in child care and supporting the development of the front-line workforce. Issues related to compensation, professional development, workplace support, staffing levels and enforcement of quality standards are all part of this picture.

## Town Day Care: Highlighting the Crisis

The challenges in Nova Scotia's child care sector were certainly highlighted during the recent four-day strike of 15 Unifor members at the Town Day Care in Glace Bay. Bearing through the chilling cold in March, these members – who work as Early Childhood Educators, cooks, cleaners and maintenance workers – were forced to walk out to fight for a better workplace and improved working conditions.

*I've been working in this field for over 25 years, not making much more than minimum wage. This is shameful ... I am the main source of income in my family, and it's been a long-time struggle living with poverty-level wages, but I do it because I love my work and the children I teach.*

-Mary MacAulay, Early Childhood Educator, Town Day Care

<sup>5</sup> Child Care Human Resources Sector Council. "You be we still care: A survey of centre-based early childhood education and care in Canada." 2013.

Town Day Care has a proud history in the local community, including being a pioneer in providing quality care for children with special needs. Town Day Care’s employees, a workforce whose wages have remained low and have not kept pace with the costs of living over the last number of years, were asked to take a freeze in compensation across the board. At the same time, employees of the day care have continued to keep the centre afloat by providing quality care for 84 children, including many with special needs, while operating with constrained resources.

In recent years, the day care centre has not seen any funding increases from government grants like the Early Childhood Enhancement Grant (ECEG) and Supported Child Care Grant (SCCG), despite the increased annual costs of operating such a facility. The centre has also needed to perform capital improvements on the aging facility, which has placed additional financial pressure on the centre since capital improvements are not funded through the ECEG or SCCG.

*We're at a point we just can't do it anymore without some kind of help from the government with an increase in our per diems from them.*  
-Sally MacLeod, Chair of the Board, Town Day Care

During this time, the centre has done what it can to keep parent fees at levels that aren’t prohibitive. The strike revealed that many parents were in payment arrears – sometimes in large amounts – which affected the centre’s financial health. Unfortunately, the centre had been placed between a rock and a hard place: provide some fee payment flexibility to parents in need or turn them away. The centre should be applauded for having the courage to provide that flexibility without refusing child care services to struggling parents who wouldn’t be able to afford child care otherwise. However, this flexibility shouldn’t unilaterally come from the wages of the workers.



Clearly, the strike highlighted several issues: workers are not being compensated or given the support they deserve, the centre is receiving inadequate levels of funding from government, and child care is not affordable for many local families. As part of the strike’s resolution, the union and the employer of Town Day Care agreed to come together on a quarterly basis to review the detailed financial documents of the centre to seek solutions for these challenges. This demonstrates that both parties have the shared commitment to ensure that parents can afford to bring their children to the centre, that their children receive the highest quality care possible and that the employees are adequately compensated and

supported in their development. Both parties agree that enhanced government support, including funding, and the government’s commitment to these goals is essential.

## Recommendations

### A commitment to a universal child care system in Nova Scotia

The only way to provide Nova Scotia families with affordable and high-quality child care and child care workers with adequate compensation is through the development of a coherent, public child care system in the province. Currently, the child care sector is operated by standalone non-profit and for-profit operations that receive funding through a patchwork of provincial funding envelopes. Nova Scotia is among the lowest in the country in terms of provincial budget spending on early childhood education services, the proportion of 2-4 year-olds attending early childhood education programs, and in early childhood educator compensation.<sup>6</sup>

The government needs to take a first bold step by committing to establishing a universal child care system in the province. Quebec has demonstrated how developing a coherent and integrated provincial system benefits families and the province through affordable and high-quality services. Nova Scotia could also follow the example of Manitoba, where the government has recently committed to making early learning and child care universally accessible, and has taken concrete steps toward this goal.

### A vision and concrete steps toward a universal system

A new vision for Nova Scotia would involve a commitment to a system based on broad elements and principles: universality, public funding, non-profit, regulation, high quality, comprehensive service integration, social inclusion and respecting the rights of Aboriginal communities.

However, a vision also needs a concrete plan. In Manitoba, the government has established a commission – comprised of experts in various areas around early childhood learning and child care – to draw a road map on how to achieve its goal of making early learning and child care universally accessible. Nova Scotia should follow this model while taking immediate steps to alleviate the current pressures that parents and operators are facing in the sector.

### Short-term support to address immediate challenges

While Unifor recommends that the government make a commitment to a universal child care system that is based on fundamental principles, such a system will obviously take time to develop and implement. As the Town Day Care strike has shown, we are in a crisis and cannot wait for the long-term solution to be put in place. The government should take concurrent measures to address the immediate challenges that families, workers and centres are currently facing.

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<sup>6</sup> Atkinson Centre at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. “The Early Childhood Education Report 2014.” 2014.



This short-term and medium-term support should achieve the following outcomes:

- 1) Increasing the number of regulated child care spaces in Nova Scotia
- 2) Placing a cap on parent fees
- 3) Establishing a wage grid for Early Childhood Educators (ECEs)

Options for enhancing immediate support to improve accessibility and affordability include:

- Boost funding transfers through the Early Childhood Education Grant in order to enhance support going to child care facilities, and directly to workers who are providing direct care to children.
- Boost funding transfers through the Supported Child Care Grant in order to provide for more programs and support for children with special needs.
- Boost funding and raise eligibility for the Child Care Subsidy Program in order for more parents to access services.
- Establishing benchmarks for provincial grant funding to operators related to parental fees (e.g. caps), worker wages and reporting requirements.
- Ensure better public management in the sector by working with non-profit operators to improve administrative practices and management of facilities.
- Explore opportunities for establishing connections between non-profit child care operators and under-used public infrastructure.

## Conclusion

Unifor members – along with thousands of other workers who care for children in Nova Scotia – do this work every day, and are well-positioned authorities on how to improve the sector



through their collective experiences. We support the development of healthy communities, strong local economies and women's equality, and understand that a strong child care system is crucial for this process. The government is at a critical point and has the opportunity to follow the same path as other provinces – by making bold steps toward a universal, public child care system and ensuring that parents and communities have access to high-quality services that are provided by a supported workforce.