

{ CHILD CARE AND EARLY EDUCATION }

The Current Situation

In 2015, Albertans elected a government that campaigned on promises to make child care more affordable and to pursue greater gender equality in the province. The first budget released in October 2015 went further, committing the government to create child care spaces that were more affordable, higher quality, and more accessible for families. These commitments represent the most forward-thinking approach to child care Albertans have ever had from a government.

Poor access to child care disproportionately affects women. Lack of access to child care hinders women's ability to full economic participation, and many child care workers, who are overwhelmingly women, report low wages and limited professional opportunities, resulting in high staff turnover rates. The current government has taken significant steps towards a better child care system and greater gender equality within Alberta. These include:

- Creation of the Ministry of the Status of Women, which includes a mandate to create and support a regulated, affordable child care system in Alberta.
- Implementation of the Early Learning and Child Care Centres pilot project to support greater affordability, accessibility, and quality in non-profit centres across Alberta.

Under previous governments, child care was not a high priority. New investments were few, and the sector was often saddled with cuts, such as the 2013 elimination

of the Quality Enhancement Grant. Recent years have also seen continual growth in the proportion of child care centres run as for-profit operations.

Child care costs in Alberta's two major cities are some of the highest in the country. Subsidies to both families and child care professionals are insufficient, with the maximum allowance of \$628 per child leaving many families still paying hundreds of dollars in monthly fees.

Due to unaffordability of quality care, many families have had no choice but to use poor quality, unregulated care or are forced to leave the paid workforce when they cannot afford the costs of child care. Women remain the most likely to leave the paid workforce due to inaccessible child care, and child care continues to be an issue that disproportionately disadvantages women.

Despite the current government's revenue shortage, it has taken some tentative steps towards the creation of a more comprehensive child care strategy. A new federal government has also allocated funding to begin planning a child care system for Canada. However, as child care has not been a priority of previous governments, the sector is still in need of significantly more support.



Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest

The Vision: Build a comprehensive, high-quality, affordable, publicly-funded early childhood education and care system accessible to all families, regardless of their ability to pay.

The Government of Alberta should prioritize action in the following areas to ensure families are fully supported in the care and development of their children:

1. Continue investment in a universal, truly affordable, high quality child care system

- Establish long-term, stable funding for Early Learning and Care Centres (ELCCs)
- Raise the standards for staff training in ELCCs to increase the quality of care

2. Support the professionalization of early childhood educators to improve quality

- Strengthen training standards for early childhood professionals by phasing in a requirement for at least a two-year diploma in the field, with support for workers already in the field to meet the new requirements
- Increase wages of workers to retain well-trained staff in front-line positions.
- Immediately begin developing a strategy to support child care centres implementing the province's early learning and care curriculum framework

3. Improve accessibility to high quality early childhood education and after school care programs

- Invest in increased access to child care spaces for families with infants, children with special needs, and those living with lower incomes
- Improve hours of accessibility to child care spaces to support families with non-traditional working hours
- Require all new schools and other publicly-owned facilities to incorporate additional space for early childhood and after school programs
- Consider underutilized schools as sites for child care centres where there is an unfilled need in the community