

THE IMPORTANT ROLE FOR CHILD CARE
IN B.C.'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY

HOW COVID-19 HAS REINFORCED THE NEED FOR UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE IN B.C.



2020 has already proven itself to be an unprecedented year.

We are navigating a global health pandemic that has impacted every part of our society and has changed the world as we know it.

In March 2020, strict public health measures were implemented in B.C. to prevent the increased spread of COVID-19, which put a freeze on social and economic interactions. Many services and businesses were forced to close or drastically adapt their service model to comply with public health orders.

As B.C. enters the tenth week of restrictions, the province's coronavirus curve has flattened signaling what the Provincial Health Officer has called the 'end of the beginning.' With no vaccine or treatment options available for the foreseeable future, B.C. joins the rest of the world in redesigning our social economic structures for at least twelve to eighteen months of a 'new normal'.

CUPE | Canadian Union
of Public Employees

BRIEF PREPARED BY CUPE NATIONAL RESEARCH

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Affordable Public Child Care – A necessary part of the new normal and a key to economic recovery

The attached document was created prior to COVID-19 being declared a global pandemic and prior to B.C. entering a state of emergency. It outlines how integration of public child care delivery within our existing school system best meets B.C.'s child care needs and recommends the seamless day model for that integration. As the document articulates, the recommended system would create thousands of school-age child care spaces within a very short time period, and with limited public investment as compared to other models. Further, the evidence presented shows that the affordability of the seamless day model in no way compromises quality, and that it is, in fact, a highly regarded design for early learning and care.

B.C.'s experience managing the outcomes of the pandemic has clearly demonstrated the need for affordable and accessible public child care. As the province transitions to a new phase of pandemic management, access to child care for essential and other workers is vital to both keeping our health and first-responder systems operating, and enabling other parts of the economy to re-open.

As the 'new normal' becomes a reality, it will be important to ensure that child care services have proper accountability measures to keep workers and children safe, and that parents have confidence in those measures. Public child care delivered by school districts has such measures built in as part of an existing robust public system with accountability and oversight infrastructure. The reality of public child care in school districts means that parents have access to accountability through those at their child's school, through the district and the local school board, and through the B.C. government. Further, the B.C. government and provincial health office have multiple tools of accountability to ensure that child care is adhering to provincial health orders, meeting the needs of communities across the province, and is not being delivered in a manner that risks further outbreaks of COVID-19.

Without accessible, affordable, quality child care in place, parents called back to work won't be able to return – regardless of the decisions made by our government about reopening the economy. Such a situation would have far reaching economic and social implications for the province and its recovery efforts. Conversely, investments in public child care bring with them the creation of stable, good paying jobs in the child care sector that can themselves aid in our economic recovery.

While much of the economic stimulus spending tends to favour male-dominated fields like construction, increased spending in female-dominated sectors, like child care, is also vitally important. The creation of public child care helps ensure women, who have suffered higher job loss and reduced hours during the pandemic, can participate in the workforce¹, both by providing direct employment and by providing the opportunity for greater labour force participation. This is important from both an economic perspective and an equity perspective.

¹ https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_april_2020.pdf, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200409/dq200409a-eng.htm>

The Path Forward: Continue, enhance and make existing emergency child care in schools permanent

When B.C. schools cancelled in-class learning, and child care centres were forced to operate at a reduced capacity, the impact of child care shortages were clearly visible. Only days into B.C.'s pandemic response, child care was deemed a critically important essential service required to both maintain our necessary systems and to support the economy. The challenge of quickly creating high quality, safe and affordable child care was met using the very system proposed by the attached paper: direct delivery by school districts using existing CUPE members. When called upon, B.C.'s public education system was able to quickly adapt and offer this vital service because, as the paper notes, the organization of before and after school care in B.C.'s public schools is completely congruent with the existing spaces, staffing and administrative structures of the K-12 system.

While COVID-19 has changed the child care landscape and new opportunities and challenges have emerged, the same basic needs and opportunities exist as before the pandemic. Even before COVID-related needs are assessed, and the impacts of B.C.'s school closures have been factored, the province had only enough child care spaces for 20 per cent of B.C.'s kids. As a phased return to school for students is now contemplated, consideration must also be given to the different child care needs that parents will have, and the plan for economic recovery must include an accelerated strategy for implementing universal child care, including the continuation of school-age child care services delivered in existing space in public schools by school district employees. This strategy effectively responds to the heightened needs created by the pandemic, and helps the province reach the goals outlined in the BC Coalition of Child Care Advocates' \$10 a Day Plan.

In consideration of the existing child care currently being provided in public schools, the expected trajectory for a return to classrooms for students, the likely increased needs for child care in the weeks to come, and the Province's ability to implement a responsive service plan, some immediate implementation proposals include:

- Schools (all or a select number by district) should offer before and after school care for students in Kindergarten – Grade Six and vulnerable students. Plans would be created and implemented by districts with input from the union(s). Local school boards would have ultimate oversight.
 - Programs would be delivered on school sites in classrooms, multipurpose rooms, gyms or other indoor spaces. Use of outdoor space should also be considered whenever possible as we understand that being outdoors can reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19.
 - Hours of operation should be set by each school district but should continue to accommodate the needs of front-line workers (and other essential shift workers) during the pandemic.
 - Fees should be charged on a cost-recovery basis and should be in line with what existing non-profit programs are charging, with the eventual goal of reducing these to no more than \$10 per day.
 - The creation of new positions could be combined with expanding the hours of existing school district employees, which both meets labour market needs and also contributes to recovery by creating well-paying, full-time, secure public sector jobs (For example, many EAs work part-time hours, and the addition of providing child care before or after school would create full-time employment for them).
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- Health and safety considerations for staff and students are a top priority and should be guided by the Provincial Health Officer (PHO) and the BC Centre for Disease Control. School Districts' safety plans should be adapted to incorporate before- and after-school care services. Additional risk assessments should be conducted as necessary and should continue as we move through different recovery phases during the pandemic.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The rise of COVID-19 and the related health orders and economic challenges have highlighted the essential nature of accessible child care, and the severe shortage of secure and reliable options, even after three years of significant government investment.

Moving forward, B.C. should accelerate the expansion of quality, affordable child care options in all parts of the province. Not only is access to quality public child care a critical element of a successful and speedy economic recovery, but also a key factor in securing B.C.'s long-term economic prosperity.

In recent weeks, the success of public school-age child care in the K-12 system has already been demonstrated, and this model has proven to be a practical, safe and cost-effective way to quickly expand quality child care across the province. Continuation and expansion of this model very clearly achieves immediate, intermediate and long-term goals for child care services, and takes us further down the path to achieving a universal system of integrated early childhood care and learning.

Finally, while this paper considers child care needs for school-age children and the expansion of spaces for that age group, there is also a very clear need for early learning and care for younger children. Options for increased public delivery of child care services for the zero to five age group should be explored both to meet the immediate needs of families during the pandemic, and the long term needs post pandemic, and could easily begin with a study of universal junior kindergarten as a logical first step.

Short-Term Recommendations

Continue to deliver school-age child care to the children of essential workers and vulnerable students through the public K-12 system throughout summer 2020.

Transition and adapt public school-age child care services delivered by school districts to integrated before and after school care services as an increased number of B.C. students physically return to school.

Continue the School District 53 seamless day pilot project in Oliver, B.C. and look for opportunities to expand the pilot program where possible during the pandemic. Develop plans for a significant expansion of the pilot post-pandemic.

Discuss how to move towards a system of integrated early childhood care and learning, eliminating the 'split system' approach and integrating education and child care into one Ministry.

Consider investments in infrastructure (physical spaces, retrofits, etc.) that enable expansion of child care services in public schools and the future delivery of junior kindergarten and other zero to five-year-old child care options.