

UBC Daycare Parent Council
2881 Acadia Road
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14 October 2009

The Honourable Margaret MacDiarmid
Minister of Education and Minister Responsible for Early Learning and Literacy
PO Box 9045, Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, BC V8W 9E2

Dear Minister MacDiarmid:

We write this letter in response to a comment you made in an interview reported in the *Gulf Islands Driftwood* newspaper (“District 64 wants say in all-day plan for kindies” by Sean McIntyre, Sept. 2, 2009). In that interview, according to the article, you stated that the province would not expand early learning programs to include subsidized daycare spaces, because “the people of BC have not voiced a strong demand for subsidized daycare.”

Assuming the quote is accurate, with all due respect, we beg to differ. We write on behalf of the UBC Daycare Parent Council, a nonprofit society representing parents of children enrolled in daycare centres at the University of British Columbia. UBC Childcare Services is the largest university-operated childcare service in North America and the largest single location nonprofit childcare provider in BC. From our observations, huge numbers of parents of young children in this province are anxious to obtain access to affordable, high-quality daycare and out-of-school care spaces for their children and currently face enormous barriers to securing adequate childcare. As far as we can see, the only reasons angry parents are not flooding the streets in protest are: (1) they are too anxious and preoccupied with their immediate childcare situation to mount a political advocacy campaign; and (2) families are in this situation typically for 10-15 years, then once their children grow past the age of requiring childcare, they have no energy left for advocacy on childcare issues.

The situation at UBC illustrates a level of need that is not unusual, at least in Vancouver. There is extremely high demand for spaces in UBC’s daycares, which recently increased their total number of spaces by 106 to a new total of 460 spaces. These spaces exist with virtually no help from the province of British Columbia (aside from a few meagre grants that were recently cut back). They operate in part through heavy subsidization from the University of British Columbia, but the majority of the cost is borne by parents. Despite fees ranging from a minimum of \$725 for students and a maximum of \$1050 for all-day infant care, there is a wait list of nearly 1500 parents in line to obtain care and wait times ranging from 2 to 2.5 years for new applicants to obtain spaces. UBC administrators receive a constant barrage of complaints about how lack of daycare availability creates enormous stress in their lives and limits their ability to perform productively in their jobs. It is not unusual for students to forego education or drop out of programs prior to graduation because they cannot secure affordable childcare. UBC’s centres are actually less expensive than many around the city, due to the university’s generous support.

UBC understands the importance of having a happy and productive work force and student population and is doing what it can to provide childcare to allow that for as many affiliated parents as possible. We believe the province should take a long-term view and do the same. Ensuring families' access to high quality childcare spaces should be a government responsibility, not one left ad hoc to employers and local individuals or organizations, since British Columbians deserve equal access to childcare regardless of where they work or the neighbourhood in which they happen to live.

We know the demand for childcare is not isolated to UBC. Daycare centres around Vancouver nearly always have long wait lists, and 2-3 years is not an unusual wait time. If wait list times are not persuasive enough evidence, perhaps available public opinion poll results are. A September 2008 Environics survey of 1000 Canadians found that 77% of Canadians (and 85% of BC respondents) believe affordable child care is a serious problem in Canada today. In addition, 83% of respondents (and 90% in BC) thought that governments have a very important role to play in helping parents meet childcare needs.¹ An August 2009 Ipsos Reid poll of 801 BC residents found that 76% of respondents supported the idea of the provincial government creating a new child care program to assist working families in its 2009 budget.²

Why is there such a shortage of high-quality licensed childcare spaces in BC if demand is high? The simple answer is the gap between the cost of providing such care and the costs that families can reasonably bear in their household budgets to pay for such care. Ideally, we would like to see the provincial government take responsibility for closing that gap through investing funds in daycare programs, at the same time facilitating a sliding scale of fees that would make childcare affordable for families at all income levels and would allow childcare professionals to provide high-quality care while earning the wages they deserve for such valuable work.

We applaud the province's commitment to phase in optional all-day kindergarten programs in BC schools, and are pleased with the statements we have seen from you thus far, which have emphasized that such programs must focus on a combination of play-based development and academic learning, with active involvement of certified early childhood educators, who are the professionals best attuned to four and five-year-old children's developmental needs and capabilities. We are at a loss, however, to understand why the provincial government would consider kindergarten to be the earliest stage at which all-day high quality childcare would be a need or desire for BC families. BC's existing Strong Start programs are excellent resources for those families who wish to or can afford to have one parent at home full-time with a preschool-aged child. However, they are not a substitute for the availability of all-day childcare for working families since they only last a few hours and require the presence of a parent or guardian during the program sessions. Reports based on widely respected data have shown repeatedly that Canada lags pitifully behind international peer group countries in its public investment in early childhood development and childcare. We would encourage you and your cabinet colleagues to consider these reports seriously. A 2008 UNICEF report ranked Canada last (tied with Ireland) among 25 developed countries examined for government policy and support for young children and families.³ A 2006 OECD report ranked Canada last among OECD countries reviewed for government funds invested in childcare.⁴

Not only is British Columbia a laggard in comparison with other jurisdictions, but it is missing out on a terrific short and long-term investment opportunity. A recent examination by the Human Early Learning Partnership at UBC⁵ found that economic and social returns from greater government investment in human capital development in children (including funding for childcare spaces) far outweigh their costs. Such investment provides immediate economic stimulus and productivity gains in the economy, as well as longer-term healthcare savings, child welfare system savings, savings on expenditures on policing and the justice system. The minimum estimate that economists have calculated for government returns on expenditures in childcare is \$2 for every \$1 invested in childcare, and many make much higher estimates. A report released last month by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, based on research by the Centre for Spatial Economics, calculated the benefit-cost ratio of government investment in early childhood education and care to be 2.54, which is higher than the benefit-cost multipliers for other key “brick and mortar” or business subsidy investments that the federal and provincial government have favoured thus far.

In short, we are rather perplexed by the seeming deaf ears that the BC government has with regard to BC families’ dire needs and demands for child care access and government investment. Even more dumbfounding is the government’s blindness to the boosted economic activity and savings in social welfare expenditures that would result from public investment in creating more high quality childcare spaces. We are not sure what would be a better way to get our message across to you. Remember, however, that we are paying attention; and while children cannot vote, their parents can.

Respectfully,



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Cc: Hon. Mary Polak, Minister of Children and Family Development, Min. Responsible for Child Care
Robin Austin, MLA, Critic for Education, Early Learning and Literacy
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Georgia Straight Newspaper
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Ted Field, Reporter, Global BC News

¹ For survey details, see

[http://www.ccaac.ca/pdf/resources/polls/2008EnvironicsReport Attitudes toward child care.pdf](http://www.ccaac.ca/pdf/resources/polls/2008EnvironicsReport_Attitudes_toward_child_care.pdf).

² For other survey details, see <http://www.nupge.ca/node/2525>.

³ UNICEF. 2008. *The Child Care Transition. Innocenti Report Card 8*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. Available online at

http://www.unicef.ca/portal/Secure/Community/502/WCM/HELP/take_action/Advocacy/rc8.pdf.

⁴ OECD, *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD (2006). Available online at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/14/32/37425999.pdf>.

⁵ Kershaw, Paul, Lynell Anderson, Bill Warburton, and Clyde Hertzman. *15 by 15: A Comprehensive Policy Framework for Early Human Capital Investment in BC*. Human Early Learning Partnership, University of British Columbia (August 2009). Available online at <http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca/documents/2009/15by15-Full-Report.pdf>.