

CARDUS PRESENTATION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, SENATE OF CANADA, REGARDING BILL C-35, AN ACT RESPECTING EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE IN CANADA

Submitted by Peter Jon Mitchell, Family Program Director, Cardus

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Thank you for the invitation to appear today and thank you for the work this committee is doing in support of Canadian families. My condolences on the passing of the Honourable Senator Shugart.

Cardus is a non-partisan think tank dedicated to clarifying and strengthening, through research and dialogue, the ways in which people, institutions, and governments work together for the common good. I direct our family program at Cardus, which explores how to strengthen family stability.

At Cardus, we recognize that families use diverse forms of childcare to meet their needs and desires. Care is often costly, whether provided in a licensed facility, by a provider in the child's home, or by a parent who forfeits earned income to care for their child. Child care is the care of a child no matter who does it. We propose policies that support parent-led decision making across a diverse spectrum of care options.

Bill C-35 directs federal funds toward limited forms of child care, resulting in many families receiving no benefit from the program. Some estimates suggest there is only enough licensed centre-based spaces for less than 30 percent of children. Data suggest families with lower socioeconomic status are less likely to access this type of care. So, the very people who might need it most, research shows, have less access. A more equitable approach would be to support parents directly. This could be achieved by providing the provinces and territories with greater discretion in how to direct funds in order to effectively support all families.

Although the current federal child care strategy is flawed, given the trajectory of the bill through the legislative process, I would like to offer three recommendations.

First, is to recognize that at the heart of child care policy are children. The best way policymakers can support child development is to support families who are the primary caregivers. Bill C-35 should clearly recognize the primary role of families in child development. Section 5(e) of the bill echoes Article 18(3) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child "to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-

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care services.” The same article of the Convention also states parents and legal guardians, “have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interest of the child will be their basic concern.” Bill C-35 should explicitly recognize the principle that parents and guardians have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child, and are best positioned to make child care decisions for their children.

Second, Section 7(1)(a) should be amended to reflect the contribution of private providers, many of whom are small businesses run by female entrepreneurs. Provinces such as Alberta and New Brunswick bear an extra burden while attempting to create new spaces. A majority of spaces in these provinces are operated by private providers, but their agreements restrict the number of new spaces these providers can create. The restrictions against private providers leave provinces like Alberta and New Brunswick at a disadvantage.

Third, improve the reporting process for better policymaking and accountability. Although we are now in the third fiscal year of the five-year Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreements, there has been no publicly released, federal progress report to my knowledge. The little publicly available data from the provinces and territories reveals that the early phase of implementation has proven to be slow and complex. Cardus just released our first three provincial funding updates on the implementation of the first year of the federal program. The results, reported widely, show slow implementation at best.

British Columbia spent just 11 percent of its year one allocation in the first year, missing many of its inclusion targets. The province reports that it is unlikely to meet future inclusion targets due to challenges within the sector.

Saskatchewan exceeded its first-year space creation funding allocation, but met just 37 percent of its targeted new spaces. Last week the province reported that it created approximately 5,700 spaces in the first two years of the program. Yet it will need to create an additional 22,000 spaces in the next three years to meet its five-year commitment.

While section 16 of the bill regarding the Minister’s report has been improved since first reading in the House of Commons, it lacks the specificity needed to ensure accountability. Section 16 should be amended to include detailed expenditures and specific results for each province. The Minister should make public audited financial statements, and report on the progress toward the specific targets identified within the provincial and territorial action plans.

As the agreements expire in the next few years, the provinces and territories will return to the negotiating table with the federal government. It is important for Canadians to have an accurate picture of the implementation of the program to determine the success of this program.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to any questions you may have.

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ABOUT CARDUS

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