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ECONOMIC RECOVERY:

Getting it right for women
and families in Ontario

by Janet Davis – August, 2020



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Introduction

Canadian families are emerging tentatively from the cocoon of lockdown, quarantine, home schooling, remote working, and temporary income support—and are asking what comes next. While governments responded swiftly to support workers, families, and businesses as the pandemic began to take its toll, the response also exposed the stagnant inadequacy Canada’s social infrastructure.

The critical role of school and child care to economic recovery has become glaringly evident to government and the private sector, and Canadian women are facing the unwelcome, decades-old choice of working or staying home, this time with the very real added fear for the health and safety of their families. More than ever, it is time to advance women’s equality along a path toward a universal early-learning and child care system in Canada.

The post-pandemic recovery presents an opportunity for much-needed and fundamental change. Canada requires a comprehensive strategy for economic recovery that helps workers re-establish and maintain attachment to the workforce, ensures adequate income for all, and supports inclusion and gender equity. The federal and provincial/territorial governments have to date demonstrated a remarkable level of cooperation in addressing the pandemic emergency. The time is right for a new era of cooperative federalism that provides the policy framework and stable, ongoing funding arrangements to support families in this emerging, fragile economy and on into the future.

COVID-19's Inequitable Health Outcomes

The pandemic has had disproportionately negative impacts on certain communities and populations and reflects existing health, income, racial, and gender inequalities. Research by [Toronto Public Health](#) and [Public Health Ontario](#) has confirmed that communities and populations experiencing poverty, systemic racism, lower education levels, unemployment, and poor housing conditions also have a higher rate of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations than the population as a whole.

Women make up the [majority of essential workers](#) and are overrepresented in public-facing, precarious, and higher-risk occupations such as health care, human services, food production, and critical retail. Workers in these sectors, which often include congregate living or working environments, often have inadequate access to personal protective equipment (PPE), less ability to social distance, and inadequate sick leave and benefits.

It's clear that rather than being the "great equalizer," COVID-19 has put the spotlight on the systemic inequalities that continue to buffet marginalized communities.



Employment Loss Disproportionately Affected Women during the Pandemic

Early in the pandemic, it became clear that [women were bearing the brunt of job loss](#) related to the crisis. In March 2020, the decrease in employment among women aged 25 to 54 years was more than twice the decrease among men. Women make up just under half (47%) of all workers but accounted for two-thirds (63%) of all job losses. A [Royal Bank of Canada \(RBC\) report](#) released on July 16, 2020, indicated that the pandemic had pushed women's labour force participation down to its lowest level in three decades and concluded that rebounding will be difficult. The report also pointed out that women shouldering the burden of child care are more likely to "fall out" of the labour force.

A recently released Canadian [study by Yue Qian and Sylvia Fuller from the University of British Columbia](#) concluded that the pandemic exacerbated gendered and class-based inequalities in employment, particularly for less-educated women who were parents of school-aged children. These gender-based employment gaps risk becoming further entrenched without policy supports to help mothers and those with less education return to the labour market.

[Women continue to be hard hit as the economy reopens](#). New analysis of Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) applications shows that women applicants made up 61% of those receiving CERB for the first time between June and July. June employment data show permanent layoffs for women increased by nearly 150% between June 2019 and June 2020—more than double the increase for men. Only 42.4% of women with children under 12 are seeking employment compared to 51.7% of women without young children.

The gender gap in the reopening economy is a policy challenge that governments must take seriously.



Returning to School Under the Threat of COVID-19

The uncertainty surrounding the reopening of schools and child care has emerged as a key pressure for parents, health experts, and governments as the economy reopens and the summer weeks pass.

For almost six months, parents have expressed concern about their children and about their own ability to cope with the complex demands that COVID-19 has brought into their lives. Mainstream and social media are filled with accounts of strained parents—working at home or hoping to return to work—who are concerned about the safety and well-being of their children as they try to plan for child care and school reopening.

On the one hand, parents are concerned for the health of their children and the risk that their kids could spread a school-related outbreak to aging relatives or other at-risk family members. On the other hand, they are anxious about the strain of going through an extended period of parenting, work, and supporting their children through online or remote learning. Many don't have the luxury of keeping their kids at home, while others worry about the quality of education in part-time or mixed models of delivery. Issues such

as children's opportunities to socialize and how to manage screen time are at the top of parents' minds. As [one parent put it](#), "It's a very tough decision. Do they put their kid in and be terrified? Do they hold them back and continue to suffer at home.

A recent [Statistics Canada survey](#) found that 74% of families [KM: across Canada were very or extremely concerned about "balancing child care, schooling and work," with 71% of parents "very or extremely concerned" about their children's opportunity to socialize and 61% "very or extremely concerned" about their children's screen time. A Nanos poll for the Ontario Public School Boards' Association found that the [public had mixed views about returning to in-person learning, and a Toronto District School Board \(TDSB\) study](#) recently reported that parents, staff, and students are concerned about "readjusting to school, interacting with others and coping with change." This study also found that 60% of families are concerned about their children being unable to interact with friends, though only 66% plan to send their children back to school.

Returning to School Under the Threat of COVID-19 - continued

While international evidence appears to be emerging that children experience less serious physical health impacts from COVID-19, the impact of school reopenings on community transmission is still uncertain. At the same time, educators, doctors, and social workers have been expressing increasing concerns about significant indirect impacts on young people and are advocating a return to in-class learning as critically important to the educational, social, and emotional health and well-being of children.

A June report in the [Canadian Medical Association Journal](#) highlights the potential [indirect impacts of not returning to school on children's physical, social, and mental health](#), including social isolation, food insecurity, domestic violence, irregular routines, reduced sleep, and lack of physical activity.

Governments and public health authorities are struggling to balance the health risks of reopening child care and schools with the impacts of continued social isolation on children and their families and the economic repercussions of women's prolonged absence from the workforce. There is broad endorsement of governments funding the necessary supports for schools, students, and staff as they return. The majority want to see improved health and safety protocols, enhanced caretaking, technology improvements, and supports for special needs and mental health.

Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children recently [released a document](#) that suggested children needed to be back in schools and gave advice on safe return strategies.



Ontario's Back-to-School "Plan"

On July 30, 2020, the [Ontario government released their requirements and guidelines](#) for school boards as they plan their responses to COVID in the 2020/21 school year. Key elements of these requirements and guidelines included:

- Full-day, in-person school five days a week for all elementary (K-8) students, with no limits to class sizes
- Mandatory masking for all students in grades 4 and up
- Secondary students in 24 designated larger school boards will attend school half time in class cohorts of about 15, while students in all other (non-designated) boards will be able to attend school in person full time.
- Parents can opt out of sending their children to in-person school
- Ontario is investing in
 - additional health nurses, teachers, and custodians, although it's unclear how the funding and hiring will proceed
 - additional supports for students with special needs and for students' mental health
 - additional health and safety training for staff
 - funding for coronavirus testing

While this announcement provides school boards with guidance, it leaves significant planning and decision making to school boards in order to fully implement the return to school and to communicate with parents.

Initial reaction to the province's plan has been mixed, with some parents expressing relief that full-day school will be available, thus providing structure and socialization that will relieve pressure at home. However, teachers and other education workers have expressed concern about the large class sizes and insufficient investment in additional teachers presented in the plan, and about the resulting health risks to children and staff. Overall, parents have more questions than answers about the government's "plan" and the ways local school boards will implement them.

The Cost of Safety

For many education administrators and parents, an essential question remains unanswered: What funding will be provided for the additional requirements for new space, facility improvements, enhanced cleaning, technology and equipment, staffing, and transportation that will keep children safe when they return?

The Toronto District School Board, in its [“Preliminary Discussion on Returning to School Plans,”](#) released an overview of program models being considered and a summary of anticipated costs. The Board projects over \$20 million in COVID-19 cost impacts for the first four months as a result of lost revenue, technology requirements, additional health and safety measures, caretaking, professional development, and other issues. The estimated costs associated with their proposed staffing models and class sizes will be between \$98.85 million and \$248.9 million for the school year.

The budget implications for most school boards are not clear at this time, although the [Waterloo Region District School Board](#) (WRDSB), for instance, has requested an additional \$8 million for COVID-19-related costs [and Ottawa-Carleton District School Board \(OCDSB\)](#) has asked for full funding from the province of Ontario to provide emergency and continuing funding to school districts to cover all extra COVID-19-related costs.

The Ontario government should pay attention to the details and concluding questions of a Nanos [poll conducted on behalf of the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association](#): “Ontarians are almost twice as likely to say spending money on public education is a more important spending priority for the government than eliminating the deficit.”

The Pandemic's Threat to Child Care

The pandemic has brought to the forefront, once again, the desperate need for child care and out-of-school programs for Canadian families. An early study of the child care services across the country revealed that the [pandemic has weakened the already fragile child care sector](#). The [Childcare Resource and Research Unit](#) found child care programs in all provinces were financially strained, understaffed, and under-resourced, with a high degree of uncertainty concerning future operations.

Many provinces did allow reopening of [child care services for essential workers](#) with enhanced health protocols and operating requirements during their shutdown period. For example in Ontario, emergency child care centres offered free care with extended hours, and the Ontario government defined essential workers broadly, including workers in health care, emergency services, transit, food supply, and other sectors. Wage top-ups for all essential workers were also provided through joint provincial and federal funding.

Accessible child care and decent pay were critical components of the emergency return-to-work strategies developed by the federal and provincial/territorial governments to ensure that services continued in health care and in critical sectors of the economy. Unfortunately, [Ontario discontinued the emergency child care centres](#) and topped-up wages on June 26, 2020. By the end of June, all provinces had allowed broad reopening of child care centres with enhanced health precautions and operating guidelines. However, many centres have chosen not to open or have opened with significantly reduced enrolment. [Ontario's operating guidelines](#) released in June for the reopening of licensed child care, set out new health requirements, a maximum group size of 10 (including staff), and guidance for physical distancing and program delivery.

The Pandemic's Threat to Child Care - continued

These provincial guidelines also prohibited any increases in parent fees. It was immediately evident that the new health requirements would have a significant impact on both access to child care spaces for families and the financial viability of centres. City of Toronto officials predicted that 56,000 (or [70% of Toronto's licensed child care spaces could be lost](#)) if additional space, enhanced funding, and other creative solutions were not found. In response to this concern, Ontario [increased maximum group sizes to 15](#), effective July 27, 2020, which they expected [would restore 91% of spaces](#) in the licensed capacity of the sector. The province also assured municipalities and child care centres that it would continue to supply stabilization funding to supplement federal wage and rent subsidies, and other [federal funding](#).

Despite these measures, according to new numbers from the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, as of late July, [only 41% of Ontario's 5,523 child care centres have reopened](#). It is unclear how many spaces will be available in September when schools are expected to reopen and the demand for child care in the province will increase.



Child Care - Reopening Options and Building a Better System

Child care organizations across the country have put forward recommendations for the safe reopening of child care and out-of-school programs. They call for significant funding increases, increased spaces, equitable pay and training for staff, and affordable parent fees (or no fees), all of which will move us toward a universally accessible system of high-quality child care for all Canadian families who need it.

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Association for Early Childhood Educators Ontario released a comprehensive report, “From Reopening to Recovery,” whose conclusion contained these recommendations:

[C]hild care must be at the center of Canada’s plans for economic recovery and “at the core of social recovery” for children, women and feminized workers in both the short and long term. The province “must move away from the old market model of child care with its heavy reliance on parent/family fees and full enrolment for the financial viability of individual child care programs” and move toward “base-funding,” which will require a tripling of child care funding in Ontario.

Child Care Now, a national child care advocacy organization, has recommended a [two-phased child care recovery strategy](#) that will both support a sustainable economic recovery and create a system of affordable child care for all. In Phase 1, \$2.5 billion of federal funding would be needed to support “a safe and full recovery of regulated early learning and child care, and to respond to the immediate needs of school-age children.” In Phase 2, federal spending would be \$2 billion in 2021/22, with the base increased each year by \$2 billion (\$4 billion in 2022/23, \$6 billion in 2023/24, etc.). The federal funds would be used “to move Canada towards a fully publicly funded system, in partnership with the provinces/territories and Indigenous governments.”

The federal government’s [“Safe Restart Agreement”](#) is intended to support child care programs in the provinces and territories over the next 6 to 8 months and “ensure that safe and sufficient child care spaces are available to support parents’ gradual return to work.”

Child Care - Reopening Options and Building a Better System - continued

However, the funding falls far short of what has been identified by child care advocates and women's organizations as necessary to support a safe reopening and build toward a national child care system. Some members of Parliament have characterized the child care funding allocation as an initial investment, with more funding slated to expand and improve the system.

Without predictable long-term increases in child care funding, women's employment opportunities during the economic reopening and beyond will continue to be compromised by the absence of reliable, affordable, licensed child care arrangements.



Challenges of Reopening Child Care and Schools Together

Reopening schools and school-based child care together poses even greater complexities and challenges. With little time remaining until school starts, government funders, regulators, and administrators of school and child care programs will need to work together to ensure a safe, innovative, and coordinated approach for reopening.

Child care has been integrated and expanded into Ontario's education system over many decades. Based on provincial policies that encourage collaboration, common pedagogy, and shared space, school board buildings have become the primary locations for child care and after-school programs in Ontario. Child care and after-school programs for school-aged children fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, but share funding and planning responsibilities with municipalities.

[In Toronto](#), 429 licensed child care centres are located in schools, serving a range of age groups, with 51 new school-based centres under development. Many kindergarten and primary classrooms are shared with before- and after-school programs under different sets of policies and regulations—including policies related to COVID-19.

Programs may face competing needs for classroom space, conflicting “cohorts” or groupings, physically distanced and shared facilities like school grounds, and lunch rooms. Licensed child care spaces have already been reduced because of COVID-19 guidelines or expanded into existing school spaces to maintain licensed capacity.

The Toronto District School Board has already begun the search for city and community facilities to accommodate expanded space requirements.

Challenges of Reopening Child Care and Schools Together - continued

With little time remaining, the burden of finding solutions will no doubt require creativity and innovation—and significant new funding for both child care and schools. New models of integrated care and education delivered by school boards should be encouraged and funded to ensure that children can return to school and child care safely, with after-school supports available for all children who need them.

Working with parents and communities, governments at all levels must develop and fund school reopening plans that support women and their families who currently face the barriers of access and cost, to secure the child care and school arrangements they need in order to return to the workforce.



Federal, Provincial, Territorial, and Municipal Government Cooperation

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis forced federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments to work together, and the new reality appeared to strengthen often-strained relationships between these jurisdictions. Canadian governments of the past, faced with crises of wars, economic collapse, and other emergencies created new federal-provincial/territorial-municipal -programs. These programs were enshrined in legislation, secured through cost-sharing agreements, and often—despite their entering areas of exclusive provincial/territorial jurisdiction—were funded using federal spending power.

Despite its limitations, the recently signed federal “Safe Restart Agreement” is an example of what can be achieved with compressed timelines and common purpose.



Conclusion

COVID-19 has had a disproportional negative impact on women and precarious workers both during the first stages of the pandemic and now as reopening moves ahead. As the employment picture sharpens, women appear to be falling through the gender gaps of the recovering economy, with fewer opportunities for work and greater barriers to overcome.

Without ongoing income and employment supports, flexible work arrangements, paid-leave provisions, and access to affordable child care, women, as well as low-income workers and others on the margins of the labour market, will fall further behind and risk losing hard-won equity gains.

COVID-19 has also revealed the inadequacy of Canada's social infrastructure, and with temporary supports about to end, Canada faces growing calls for both transitional and permanent improvements to the eligibility criteria and structure of income support, employment insurance, and workplace leave provisions so that they will truly support families in a sufficient and sustained way.]

Safe, equitable, and inclusive school and child care reopening is key to the health and well-being of women, children, their families, and our communities. And it's critical to the economic recovery and future success of our country. With little time and few new resources, women and their families, and school and child care communities need innovative solutions and a renewed commitment from governments at all levels to invest what it will take to get it right, and set us on the path to secure and safe education and social well-being.

Author's Biography

Janet Davis has been an advocate for universal access to child care and other important services for women and children for over four decades. Janet is a mother of two children, an Early Childhood Educator, former president of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, education policy advisor, CUPE union leader at the Toronto School Board and four-term City Councillor in Toronto.

