

Tory's letter on child care seen as 'pleasant surprise' but issue not 'political football': advocate ^[1]

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An advocate is pleasantly surprised that Mayor John Tory has become a champion of affordable child care, but she says more needs to be done by all three levels of government to keep costs down for Toronto parents.

Carolyn Ferns, public policy and government relations coordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, told Metro Morning that a letter written by Tory on the weekend to Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne was a positive move.

In the letter, Tory said it's time for the province to shoulder more child care costs, that child care costs have become unaffordable in the city, and the province should provide 4,918 new subsidies to enable the city to return to its ratio of subsidies to spaces that it had in 2010.

"He's correct in calling for the province to step up. You know, it's a pleasant surprise to have the mayor as a new ally in the child care fight," Ferns said Tuesday.

"But at the same, I would caution that we don't think child care should be a political football. We actually need all three levels of government, we need the city, the province and we need the federal government, to be working together to solve this child care crisis and do what's right for families."

On Monday, Tory announced that the city is backing away from a proposed budget cut to grants for schools that house day cares. If the cut had gone ahead, child care costs could have increased substantially for parents with children in school-based licensed care.

He also told CBC Radio's Here and Now that he believes social programs, such as day care, "are not meant to be paid for" by property taxes.

Ferns, however, disagrees.

"The province does have a huge responsibility in child care, but that's not to say the city can walk away from its responsibility. I think the mayor is wrong in saying with social programs like child care there's no role for the city to play."

Costs not affordable for middle-income families

Ferns said affordable child care is clearly difficult to find in Toronto. She said some people put their names on day care waiting lists when they find out they are pregnant. Only 20 per cent of children in Toronto are in licensed care.

She said licensed child care fees for preschoolers and for before and after school care can cost more than \$1,000 a month, while infant care fees can run more than \$2,000 a month.

In his letter, Tory noted there are more than 18,000 children on a wait list for city child care subsidies. If middle income families make too much, according to the income threshold for subsidies, they will not receive one yet the monthly costs can equal a mortgage payment.

The Ontario government promised in a throne speech in the fall to provide 100,000 new child spaces over five years, but details have not been released about exactly when, where and how those spaces will be created.

"We certainly want those to start rolling out quickly," Ferns said.

"But the real question is: are those spaces going to be affordable for anyone? That's the real crisis we have right now. If you don't qualify for subsidies and you are paying the full cost, child care is really unaffordable for families today."

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