

Parents cheer mayor's decision to delay daycare cut ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Toronto mother Alejandra Lara is pleased Mayor John Tory has agreed to give child care centres in schools a one-year reprieve from a cut that would have meant a fee hike for thousands of families like hers.

But she wonders what will happen next year if the province doesn't heed Tory's call to pick up the occupancy costs for 350 daycares in schools.

"It's a great first step. But we may be fighting this all over again next year. It's exhausting," said Lara, a member of the parent board at Withrow Child Care Centre in Withrow Public School where her son Daniel, 4, has been in daycare since he was 2. Her younger son Mario, 2, has just been promised a spot for July.

"Instead of constantly talking about cuts, we have to be talking about how we can build child care in this city. Families can't live in this city without it," she added.

The mayor's reversal means Lara and about 4,000 other parents won't face fee hikes of at least \$350 a year per child. (Another 4,000 low-income parents receiving subsidies and those with children in before- and after-school daycare would not have been affected.)

Tory had supported cutting support for child-care centres in schools as a way to fill a \$91 million budget gap. The occupancy grant would have saved the city \$1.13 million this year and \$2.26 million in 2018.

But the mayor acknowledged Monday that pressure from parents, daycare advocates and city councillors prompted him to reconsider.

"Asking people to pay more for child care, right now, is not reasonable, and it's not right," he told reporters at John A. Leslie Public School in Scarborough.

Tory's executive, which meets Tuesday, will continue, as promised, to recommend 300 new child-care subsidies at a cost of \$3 million. Although Tory's original plan is off the table – that was to partially fund those new subsidies with money from the daycare occupancy grant – he assured reporters the funds would be found elsewhere in the budget.

City council will finalize the 2017 budget next week.

Councillor Janet Davis called the mayor's child care reversal "good news for parents." But she is also concerned about the future.

"I'm hoping that the City of Toronto will continue to fund child care in schools until we get additional funding from the provincial government," she said.

"The parents of Toronto had a real impact on the mayor. What we saw today was a very significant reversal... I think the mayor clearly felt the pressure from parents across the city."

The city needs to keep pressuring the province, and Toronto needs to pay its fair share, Davis added.

Scarborough mother Nure Afsana Mazumdar, 25, hopes a long-term solution to the city's ongoing child care crisis is found soon.

The recent immigrant from Bangladesh had to turn down a job offer at a cosmetics factory in December because she couldn't afford daycare for her 3-year-old son Mohammad.

Mazumdar's husband, who was a banker back home, is working part-time in a call centre while retraining at George Brown College to become a fashion industry manager. But it is not enough to pay the bills, she said.

"I need to work to help our family. But I can't work without a daycare subsidy. It's very frustrating," Muzumdar said.

Mirana Akter, 39, whose husband is about to start work as a security guard, also wants to contribute. But the former teacher from Bangladesh needs daycare for her son Muttakinur Rahman, 20 months, so she can upgrade her qualifications to teach here.

"The system makes it very hard," she said. "You need to be in school to get a subsidy. But you can't get a subsidy if you aren't in school."

The women welcome Tory's proposal to fund an additional 300 daycare subsidies, but with 18,000 children on the wait list, they wonder when they will benefit.

"I think it is just a drop in the bucket," Akter said.

Despite the mayor's reprieve on daycare cuts in schools, children and families are still at risk, said Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam who is supporting a "play-in" outside Tory's office at noon Tuesday expected to draw children, parents, recreation workers and childcare providers.

The waitlist for recreation programs has grown by 64 per cent in the last three years to 189,467. Three city pools are on the chopping block. User fees for kids gymnastics, arts and crafts and homework clubs are going up by 12.3 per cent and 111 youth recreation worker jobs are being eliminated at a time when youth unemployment in the city tops 18 per cent, she noted.

"Budgets are value statements," Wong-Tam said. "And this budget does not value working families in Toronto that are struggling, especially those with kids. We want the mayor to make a long-time commitment to Toronto families."

In a letter to Premier Kathleen Wynne on Sunday, Tory called on the province to significantly boost funding to child care in Toronto.

"I firmly believe that when it comes to issues like child care and housing, it can no longer be business as usual because the status quo leaves Toronto taxpayers footing the bills that the province should be paying," Tory wrote in his letter.

Wynne acknowledged the city's need in a letter to Tory on Monday in which she notes her government pledged last fall to create 100,000 new child care spaces for kids under age 4 within the next five years.

Indira Naidoo-Harris, the province's minister responsible for child care and early years, also wrote Tory to say she has just completed a province-wide consultation on a roll-out strategy for the initiative. The provincial plan will include both capital and operating funding to address the costs of child care and support a mixed approach of school-based, community-based and home-based expansion, she said.

Ontario is also working with Ottawa to build a pan-Canadian early years and child care framework, Naidoo-Harris added.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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