

Opinion: Solving Ontario's child care crisis ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

This International Women's Day, child care should be everyone's issue — no longer just an issue for mothers and early childhood educators, but a critical matter of gender justice for our province and for Minister of the Status of Women and Minister Responsible for Early Years and Child Care Indira Naidoo-Harris.

When Toronto Mayor John Tory wrote to Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne last month about funding for child care, he described the city's child care situation as a "crisis."

For those not in the depths of the city's child care woes, that wording may have come as a surprise, but it is not hyperbole. We have a child care crisis in Ontario — a silent crisis borne by parents and educators — that is now at its tipping point.

Parent fees in Ontario are the highest in Canada. Early Childhood Educators struggle with low wages and precarious work. There are not enough quality programs for families that need them.

The Star's recent coverage of west Toronto parents' struggles with unregulated home child care shone a light on this crisis. For new parents, finding a quality child care space and then to paying for it is often an impossible puzzle, as too few spaces exist and they are unaffordable for most families. Even those qualifying for the financial support of a fee subsidy could end up on a waiting list thousands of names long. For those paying the full fee, it is well over \$1,000 a month.

Meanwhile, early childhood educators work for low wages, often in part-time, split shift jobs. Despite specialized training in the care and education of our youngest learners, nearly a quarter of ECEs in Ontario make less than \$15 an hour. Child care centres will tell you that recruiting and retaining qualified educators is a growing challenge. Educators will tell you their struggles to pay the rent, or how they can't afford to start their own family.

We find ourselves in this crisis because of government underinvestment in child care. There have been decades of research showing the benefits of good child care to children, families and the economy, but still Ontario, like most of Canada has failed to grapple with the need to change our approach to child care.

Stepping into the fray last September, the Ontario government promised to expand child care by 100,000 spaces over five years — doubling spots for 0-4 year olds. It's a big commitment and a good one.

But given the child care affordability crisis we need to ask: if there are 100,000 new spaces, who will be able to afford them? And in the midst of a workforce recruitment and retention crisis who will work in them?

Naidoo-Harris has promised that this expansion will "transform" early learning and child care for families in the province, but for that to truly happen we need more than just new spaces. We need a new system.

To solve the child care crisis, we need direct funding of a child care system and government action on three transformative ideas:

1. Affordable fees for parents. We should replace individual fee subsidies with a more modern approach. Ontario should fund child care programs directly and set a sliding fee scale that makes child care affordable for every family.
2. Decent work for educators. To hire and keep the best staff we need Ontario to make fair wages and good working conditions a priority. Funding programs based on fair wages for educators will help us build good, stable programs for our children.
3. Expand in the public and non-profit sectors. We need every dollar of this child care expansion going to our kids. There is simply no room for profit. Ontario should ensure that none of the new 100,000 spaces be in profit-making operations.

With a provincial election next year, every political party should be looking for bold ideas that make a difference to Ontario's families. Finally solving Ontario's child care crisis would be a good place to start.

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