

Denley: Ontario's child care is a mess– and it's going to cost you ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Great news, parents! The Ontario government is “investing” more than \$200 million this year to make child care more accessible and more affordable.

That’s the message politicians want you to hear, but how good a job is government doing on child care, really? Does its approach deliver child care in a way that is fair, rational and affordable?

If one believes that government-licensed child care is the best way to look after young children, then Ontario is falling down badly when it comes to fairness and accessibility. Surely such a vital program should be available to all parents, but Ontario meets only 20 per cent of the province’s child-care needs. The Liberals aim to double that over five years. At the current rate of expansion, the program will be universal by the time today’s child-care recipients have children of their own.

Tax dollars from middle-class parents support a program to which their children have no access. One could argue that non-parents should support child-care programs for the greater good, but for parents it’s like paying education taxes only to have your child turned away at the school gate.

Ontario takes a high cost approach that limits both supply and access.

Government-licensed child care features specially-trained workers and low staff-to-child ratios. The care is offered in specialized buildings whose capital costs are covered, at least in part, by government.

It won’t come as a surprise that this is really expensive. Toronto has the highest child-care costs in the country for licensed care at just under \$20,000 a year. In Ottawa, annual fees average about \$15,000.

At those prices, the only customers are low-income families who get subsidies and the well-to-do who can afford the high costs. There aren’t enough of either group to fill the spaces that exist today, much less the 24,000 new ones the government will add this year.

In Ottawa, there are about 2,600 vacant spaces in licensed child-care centres, a 10-per-cent vacancy rate. The city cites high cost and lack of subsidy dollars as key reasons for the vacancies. While daycare spaces sit empty in Ottawa, 1,100 children are waiting for a subsidy. In Toronto, there are 4,000 vacant spaces and 15,400 children waiting for subsidies, which pay up to 90 per cent of the cost.

With an approach that produces the highest child-care costs in the country and cuts out the middle class, Ontario is falling well short on affordability and fairness. It’s not doing so great on rationality, either.

After years of nurturing the licensed child-care sector, government destabilized it in 2010 when it started to make junior kindergarten full time. As the government is still telling us, that change could save parents up to \$6,500 a year in child-care costs, but it disrupted the economics of child-care centres by taking away the kids who were the least costly to look after.

The schools didn’t have space for all the students government was taking away from child care, so the province had to spend \$1.45 billion on school expansions. Now, the government says it will spend up to \$3 billion building more child-care spaces over the next five years.

None of this delivers a fair and affordable plan that will be broadly available to all Ontario parents. Surely that ought to be the goal, if government is to be involved at all.

Quebec has had low-fee daycare universally available for 20 years. Despite some issues with quality, the program is affordable, accessible and treats parents fairly. To achieve this, Quebec budgets \$2.5 billion a year, more than double what Ontario spends.

By contrast, the Ontario government serves only the rich and the poor, and at the highest possible cost, while congratulating itself for the grand job it is doing.

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