

Ontario commits to universally accessible child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario is about to become the first province outside Quebec committed to creating affordable child-care spaces for all parents who want them, according to an ambitious new vision to be released Tuesday.

“This renewed framework is a bold step forward,” said Indira Naidoo-Harris, minister responsible for early years and child care, in a statement to child care advocates. “It contains a ground-breaking set of initiatives that will help us continue to transform the early years and child-care system.”

The government’s goal to build a “universally accessible” child-care system in Ontario sets out seven action areas for the next five years, including its previously announced plan to double capacity for kids under age 4, by adding 100,000 licensed spots in homes, schools and community settings by 2022.

Other action areas include focusing expansion in the public and non-profit sectors, developing strategies to address affordability and the child-care workforce, boosting inclusion for children with special needs and drafting a provincial definition of quality in early-years programs for kids up to age 12.

Increased public education and awareness of the initiative will be supported through a new government website and annual progress reports, according to the framework, obtained by the Star.

Ontario’s spring budget earmarked \$200 million to create 8,000 new licensed spaces and about 16,000 new fee subsidies this year while the province develops its broader affordability strategy.

As part of that strategy, the government will hire an outside expert to help draft a new funding model to make child-care costs fairer and more affordable for all families.

Ontario parents pay among the highest child-care fees in the country, with Toronto families shelling out the most at up to \$20,000 a year for a licensed spot, according to a national report on the issue last fall.

A recent city of Toronto study noted that three-quarters of local families can’t afford licensed child care. Middle-income parents are most disadvantaged because their incomes are too high to qualify for fee subsidies but too low to afford the staggering cost of licensed care, the study found.

The workforce strategy is aimed at improving wages and working conditions so college- and university-trained early childhood educators are no longer among the lowest-paid professionals in the province and that they don’t leave the field for better-paying jobs.

A \$2-an-hour wage enhancement grant introduced in 2015 will continue while the workforce strategy is developed, the framework says.

About 24 per cent of registered early childhood educators working in licensed child care earn less than \$15 an hour, according to the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario.

Child-care advocates greeted the provincial vision with optimism and excitement.

“For the first time in many years, it feels like positive changes in child care can happen across Canada,” said Toronto-based child-care expert Martha Friendly of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

“The comprehensive system-building approach is what we have long recommended,” she said.

“With the affordability and workforce strategies as centrepieces and other key elements such as inclusion and expansion in the not-for-profit sector front and centre, I’m very excited about working with the child-care community, researchers and the provincial government on all this,” she added.

A spokeswoman for the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada said Ontario’s action plan contains “all the key pieces” to build a universally accessible system that will serve all parents who need care, regardless of their family circumstances, geography or income.

“We think this is exactly what needs to happen across the country,” said Morna Ballantyne.

“It’s exciting that this is happening. And we hope it’s the kind of approach that will be replicated by other provinces,” she added.

Business leaders also praised the initiative.

Richard Koroscil, interim president and CEO of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, said it will help business by making it easier for new parents to return to work. Koroscil also lauded the government’s new support for home-based child-care providers, a measure he said would create “more opportunity for people to create their own child-care businesses.”

As reported in the Star Monday, the plan will provide new funding to non-profit home child-care agencies to make it more affordable for home daycare operators to join the licensed system.

A new focus on data collection and annual reporting on the government’s progress will begin this fall, as part of a five-year “outcomes and measurement strategy” for the emerging new child-care system, the framework says.

And an updated government website, to be available in 2018, will give parents a “one-stop hub” to help them navigate Ontario’s early-years system.

About 2,100 people attended public consultations and more than 6,000 responded to an online survey about the framework last winter. Parents in cities said they can’t access licensed child care because it is too expensive while those in rural areas said centres are too far away. Shift workers said they need programs that provide weekend and evening care.

As part of the framework, a new innovation fund will help grow the non-profit sector and support different child-care models to serve families with irregular work hours or those living in small communities.

Ontario currently spends more than \$1 billion a year on almost 390,000 licensed child-care spaces for children up to age 12, including about 72,000 in Toronto.

But those spaces serve only about one-quarter of Ontario’s children at a time when more than 75 per cent of young mothers are in the workforce. Across the province, barely one in five children under age 4 have access to licensed child care. The government’s five-year expansion plan aims to double the number of spaces for this age group to 40 per cent.

Just over 26,360 children in low- to moderate-income families in Toronto have access to fee subsidies that bring daily costs down from an average of \$83 to under \$8. But lack of funding means more than 14,000 children are on the subsidy wait list as of June 1.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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