

Ontario pledges \$1.6B to create 45,000 new child-care spots ^[1]

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Ontario will spend \$1.6 billion over the next five years to kick-start its historic commitment to create high quality affordable child care for all parents who need it.

Billed as the province's largest-ever capital investment in child care, the money is expected to help create 45,000 new spaces in schools, public buildings and workplaces by 2022, said Indira Naidoo-Harris, minister responsible for early years and child care.

The money is part of the government's new policy framework for child care announced by Naidoo-Harris and Education Minister Mitzie Hunter at a downtown Toronto child-care centre Tuesday.

"This framework sets us on a path towards a universally accessible child-care system for Ontario families, one where every Ontario family that needs licensed child care can access that care," Naidoo-Harris told reporters. "It is a made-in-Ontario plan . . . that will be accessible and affordable."

If implemented, Ontario would become the first province outside Quebec to embrace the idea of universal child care. Quebec began building a universal system in 1995, charging parents \$5 a day. Most parents now pay up to \$20 a day.

Ontario has the highest child-care fees in the country with Toronto parents paying an average of \$20,000 a year for a licensed spot.

As reported in the Star Tuesday, Ontario's policy blueprint highlights 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. Capital funding announced Tuesday will help to build 45,000 of those spaces.

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.

The capital funding comes two months after the provincial budget earmarked \$200 million this year to fund 16,000 new child-care subsidies and 8,000 new spaces.

Toronto parents Andy Guglielmi and Mimi Rego, who pay between \$2,800 and \$3,000 a month on daycare for their 2-year-old twins in a non-profit centre in their downtown condo, were thrilled by the announcement.

"What a way to start a Tuesday. I'm speechless," Guglielmi said in an interview.

"Even if we don't get the benefit, I'm happy that we're going in the right direction in this province, like many other industrialized countries like Sweden and Norway who have universal systems," he said.

But he's worried that proposing such ambitious reform so close to an election puts the goal at risk. "I just wish they hadn't done this so close to the end of their term," he said.

Opposition critics slammed the Liberal plan as too little, too late.

"For 14 years, Liberals have sat on their hands as daycare has gotten more and more unaffordable and out of reach for many," said MPP Gila Martow, the Progressive Conservatives' children's critic.

"Ultimately this is yet another announcement from a government desperate to cling onto power," she said. "The Liberal scheme isn't about making life affordable for Ontario — it's nothing but a promise they will break after the next election."

NDP MPP Catherine Fife, the NDP's early years and child-care critic, was equally dismissive, calling the announcement "little more than a

publicity stunt by a Liberal government more concerned about its political fortunes ahead of next year's election than about the urgent needs of families."

Since the Liberals came to power in 2013, the number of licensed child-care spaces in Ontario has doubled to almost 390,000 and annual funding tops \$1 billion. But only one in five children under 4 has access to a licensed spot.

Advocates, who have been urging the province to build a universal system for more than 30 years, praised the government for committing to the goal and vowed to hold them to their word.

"Now that we're on track to a universally accessible system, we're going to keep up the pressure to make sure the building blocks get put in place properly so we can meet that objective," said Morna Ballantyne of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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