

# Ontario's imperfect move in the right direction on child care: editorial <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Introducing a five-year child care framework with only one year left to go to an election doesn't exactly inspire confidence it will go ahead as planned. Still, it's a good program, despite some shortcomings, and the next government, of any political stripe, should commit to it.

In 2005 the Paul Martin government was poised to invest \$5 billion over five years to kick-start a universal child care system across the country. Then the Harper government was elected in 2006, and the plan was foolishly ditched.

This time it is Ontario's Wynne government, trailing in popularity in the polls, that is unveiling a promising five-year child-care plan only a year before the next election.

Understandably parents are hoping it won't be, as Yogi Berra once said, "déjà vu all over again."

Toronto parent Andy Guglielmi says he's thrilled with the plan to dramatically increase licensed spaces, subsidized spots and boost wages for child-care workers. "I just wish they hadn't done this so close to the end of their term," he lamented to the Star's Laurie Monsebraaten.

Progressive Conservative and NDP critics alike have responded more cynically, suggesting that the announcement, coming so close to an election, looks an awful lot like a ploy to hold on to power.

But let's not be too fast to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Despite its timing and shortcomings, the plan aims to make Ontario the second province behind Quebec to create an affordable, universally accessible child-care system for Ontario families. That is commendable.

It was kicked off this week with the announcement of a \$1.6-billion investment in infrastructure to build 45,000 new child care spaces, all part of a larger plan that will see 100,000 licensed spots created by 2022.

And it builds on a series of previous provincial policies that have created some momentum on this file during Wynne's years at the helm, despite what her critics claim.

This week's funding announcement, for example, is in addition to the \$200 million set aside in this year's budget to pay for 16,000 new child-care subsidies and 8,000 new spaces. And that comes on top of the \$1 billion the government already spends each year on licensed spaces. Indeed, the Liberals have actually doubled the number of licensed child care spaces in the province since 2013.

Still, this province has a long way to go, even with this plan, before it can compare itself to Quebec, which has had a universal, affordable, subsidized child care program in place for the last 20 years.

Despite all the recent investment in Ontario, only one in five children under 4 has access to a licensed spot here, and the costs are astronomical.

Toronto, for example, has the highest licensed child-care fees in the country with parents paying an average of \$20,000 a year for each spot. In fact, a 2015 study from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives found that the average family with two children in the GTA was paying a staggering 48 per cent of after-tax income on child care, the equivalent of a second mortgage. And it's only gotten worse. In 2016 the centre reported fees in Toronto had jumped by 15 per cent over the previous two years.

No wonder then that a recent study found that three-quarters of local families can't afford licensed child care. Many middle-income families make too much money to be eligible for fee subsidies but not enough to afford the staggering costs. Poor and moderate-income families, meanwhile, face a Toronto waitlist of 14,000 to access subsidized licensed daycare.

This creates a number of problems. First, it's tough on parents who have to search high and low for affordable daycare elsewhere — or stay out of the workforce altogether to care for their kids. Second, it deprives children in families who can't access or afford subsidized child

care the benefits of an early childhood education, something the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada says actually puts their health and well-being at risk.

Finally, it's bad for the economy and for the tax base. It pays to invest in child care. A recent Ontario study found that every dollar invested in child care adds \$2.47 to the provincial economy. And a TD Bank study found that for every \$1 invested, provincial and federal governments receive \$1.50 in increased tax revenues.

It's discouraging, then, that the provincial government did not set out new affordable fees for subsidized child care in this week's framework. Instead it announced it would hire an outside expert to help draft a new funding model.

How much more studying does the province need to do? The government could simply have looked down the 401 to Quebec's system that charges parents between \$7.55 and \$20.70 a day, depending on their income, and costs the province \$2.4 billion annually.

While that may sound like a lot, studies of the Quebec model have shown it pays for itself with economic benefits. In fact, 40 per cent of the cost is recovered in income and payroll taxes alone.

Further, Quebec is not an outlier. The \$2.4 billion is about 0.6 per cent of the province's GDP. That is close to the average spent on child care by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, and below the 1 per cent recommended by UNICEF. In contrast, the OECD ranked Canada, which overall spends about 0.34 per cent of GDP on child care programs (a figure boosted by Quebec's investment), dead last out of 25 countries for quality and accessibility.

But while the timing of the announcement leaves the government open to claims of political opportunism, and the lack of immediate fee relief for parents is a disappointing shortcoming, the plan is no doubt a step in the right direction.

With this major investment in daycare, Ontario is leading where Ottawa has for too long lagged. Despite Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's focus on feminism, his government set aside a mere \$7 billion over the next decade in this year's budget for child care. That's a welcome commitment, but well under the \$1 billion a year Martin promised 12 years ago. It is not nearly enough to build a robust national system.

The Wynne government is doing the right thing, then, to move forward in the absence of firm federal leadership. Now it's up to the next Ontario government, whatever its political stripes, to ensure the plan not only goes ahead, but is accelerated. After all, no single initiative would make such a big difference in the lives of Ontario families as universal, quality, affordable child care.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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