

How to overhaul child care in Ontario: A road map for revolution

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EXCERPTS

This child-care institution needs a tear down, not a renovation.

With wait-lists, poorly compensated early childhood educators, a separate market of unlicensed child-care operators and parents who either essentially work to pay daycare bills or put careers on hold to stay home and look after their children becoming part of the rule, not the exception, it's clear several structural problems plague the current system.

How should the foundation be fixed? And where can Ontario look for inspiration?

Jill Leckie is a Scottish businesswoman who used to live in Toronto and now resides in Sweden with her partner. They are working professionals. She built a website that helps newcomers to the county adjust to life in Stockholm. The couple has an outgoing and chatty two-year-old, Stella, who is enrolled in the country's preschool system.

Leckie pays the equivalent of \$125 per month in child-care costs, which she describes as "not even a percentage" of her family's income.

"It's that small," she said. "It's ridiculous."

In Sweden, low-income families pay nothing for child care while the cost for more affluent parents is capped at just over \$200 per month. Government policy states: "Parents should only have to spend one to three per cent of the family's income on child care."

Their model is heavily subsidized by government and administered by municipalities. It's been in existence for decades.

There are a variety of preschools to choose from; they're all licensed and regulated and listed on government websites.

A one-child family with two working parents is automatically entitled to about 30 hours per week of daycare.

Families are also granted 480-days of paid parental leave. For the first 390 days, parents receive nearly 80 per cent of their normal pay.

"This child-care system works because it's so well provisioned for," Leckie said. "It's a well thought through system that starts as soon as your child is born. I don't understand why other governments around the world don't see it like that. It seems like a no-brainer. Not everybody does it equally, but it gives you that choice without having to worry about struggling."

There is a similar but somewhat more conservative model in place in Quebec. That system requires a basic contribution of between \$7.75 and \$21.20 per child, per day. The rate is set based on annual income.

Ontario has promised to review the affordability issue as part of its larger child-care strategy, which includes 100,000 new daycare spaces in the coming years.

"Child care deserves real attention from the government," said Carolyn Ferns, public policy and government relations co-ordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. "We're happy they're looking at it, but we're asking them to go further and really create a system that addresses the crisis we have in Ontario. We need to be looking at the system as a whole. We need to look at a system that brings equity and grows to really support everybody. Right now, it's leaving child care to the market. That's not really working for anybody. We're worried new funds are going into child care without really addressing how to set up a system."

According to the coalition, there are currently about 330,000 regulated childcare spaces for school-aged and younger children in the province.

But wait-lists and affordability issues are also forcing parents to consider the competing 'grey' market of available unlicensed child care.

"What kind of choice do parents have? They pounce at the first opportunity they get," Ferns said. "There aren't options."

One of the coalition's concerns is the growth of "big corporate players" in the system. Ferns said the province should place a moratorium

on the licensing of new for-profit child-care spots, adding about 25 per cent of spaces in Ontario are for-profit.

Ontario should also put accountability mechanisms in place that ensure government funding is used to lower fees and raise wages of child educators, she said.

Right now, it's incredibly difficult for many ECEs to make a good living at their profession. That's forcing several out of the field entirely.

"(ECEs) earn notoriously low wages," Ferns said, noting the province will need to hire about 20,000 new ECEs to reach its child-care expansion plan goals. "They're professionals with degrees and diplomas. The government wants to expand child care but we know there's a recruitment and retention crisis."

Swedes rarely complain about their preschool model, which has led to a variety of positive societal benefits, from equal opportunity for men and women to high quality of life index ratings. They're constructing a stable society beginning with the ground floor, not patching an aging building, Leckie said.

"I would not be doing what I'm doing if I had to look after Stella," she said. "I would not have been able to start my own business or regain my confidence, in terms of being a mom and businesswoman. It's so liberating. It keeps the economy stable."

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