

Ontario budget to fund free child care for preschoolers as part of \$2.2B plan ^[1]

In a bid to deal with Ontario's high child care costs, the Wynne government will offer free licensed care for preschoolers at an average saving of \$17,000 per child.

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 26 Mar 2018

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Every Ontario preschooler will have access to free licensed child care from age 2 1/2 until they start kindergarten under a "historic" \$2.2 billion budget boost to licensed care, Premier Kathleen Wynne pledged Tuesday.

"Not being able to find or afford child care is stressful. It is troubling, and it is holding families back at a time when it is already hard enough to get ahead," Wynne told parents at Nelson Mandela Park Public School in Regent Park about the plan, which will begin in 2020.

"Our plan ... will make sure kids are learning and growing in a safe environment."

The average Ontario family with one preschooler would save about \$17,000, while families in Toronto, where child care fees are among the highest in the country, would save more, the premier said.

[Poll available online ^[2] asks, "Does the Liberal budget daycare plan change your feelings going into the election?" Three options are available to vote on: a) Yes, we have needed free licensed child care; b) No, this is a last ditch effort by Kathleen Wynne c) Unsure, Daycare funding is important but not an important issue to me. Readers can vote and view results].

More than 125,000 kids could be served under the initiative, expected to be the cornerstone of the Wynne government's pre-election budget being tabled at Queen's Park on Wednesday.

Wynne made the surprise announcement to a cheering crowd — comprising mostly women — and received a standing ovation amid loud applause.

"This is a big change," she said, adding it will help families and particularly women who want to re-enter the workforce after having children.

"It's a historic investment that will benefit Ontario kids for generations," said Education Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris, who also attended the announcement with Finance Minister Charles Sousa.

About 106,000 preschoolers are currently enrolled in licensed care across the province at an average annual cost to parents of \$9,900, according to an analysis by University of Toronto economist Gord Cleveland, who devised the plan for the government.

The new money includes \$162.5 million in operating funding over the next three years to support continued expansion and fee subsidies for younger and older kids that will make child care more affordable for low- and moderate-income families.

The government will also create a provincial wage grid for child care workers that will bring early childhood educator wages up to the level of ECEs in the school system.

Just 20 per cent of families with one child can afford licensed care in Ontario and only very wealthy parents with two or more children can afford it, Cleveland found in his analysis.

“Making child-care free for preschool children will be transformative for Ontario’s families,” Cleveland said Tuesday in a statement.

“It will help families balance the demands of work, education and family life, and will dramatically improve affordability, especially for children in low and middle-income families.

Although child care for preschoolers is free in many European countries, Ontario would be the first jurisdiction in North America to offer the service free of charge, if implemented.

The ground-breaking proposal is part of the government’s 2016 plan to add 100,000 licensed child care spots for children under age 4 within five years.

Last year’s budget included \$200 million for fee subsidies and other affordability measures to help an estimated 28,000 parents, and \$1.6 billion to build 45,000 new spaces, mostly in schools. Wednesday’s budget is expected to include more capital funding to ensure all 100,000 new spaces are available by 2021 to meet demand.

The announcement is part of a series of promises by the Liberals in the run-up to Wednesday’s budget, their last before the June provincial election.

On Monday, Wynne announced \$300 million over three years for special education, as well as a \$625 million boost to general education funding, for a total of \$24.5 billion.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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