

Duelling daycare plans pit Liberals against NDP in battle for parent votes ^[1]

NDP 'ups the ante' with ambitious child-care platform as daycare emerges as early election issue.

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EXCERPTS

Teacher Carrie Schoemer stayed home for nearly two years after her son was born because she was unable to find affordable licensed child care in her neighbourhood.

Amanda Munday was only able to go back to work in 2015 because her mother took early retirement to help with child care.

But the east-Toronto parents' frustration over the acute lack of licensed care and punishing costs topping \$2,000 a month may soon be over.

Last week, Ontario's NDP joined the Liberals in making child care a cornerstone of their platform in the June 7 provincial election.

"These two parties understand that creating licensed child-care spaces at affordable prices is critical for women and families in my neighbourhood and across Ontario," says Schoemer, who finally got a toddler spot for 2-year-old Julian last fall.

"Child care is an election issue for our family, no question," says Munday. "We are not card-carrying members of any political party, so this will be a deciding issue for us. We are watching very closely what all the parties are saying."

[Star survey, available online: "Is daycare funding an important election issue to you?", vote and/or view the results].

The Progressive Conservatives have yet to weigh in, although a spokesperson said the party would make "an announcement on this very important issue in the coming weeks."

So far, duelling daycare platforms in Ontario pit the NDP's \$12-a-day scheme for kids under 4 against the Liberals' promise of free child care for kids age 2 1/2 to kindergarten.

The NDP would start with infants and toddlers in 2019-20 and add kids 2 1/2 and older the following year. It would be free for families earning less than \$40,000 a year and cost an average of \$12 a day for most others. The richest parents would pay the full cost, although party officials could not provide income thresholds.

Within five years, annual provincial funding would spike to more than \$5.4 billion from about \$1.6 billion today, making child care the largest single investment in the NDP platform, unveiled last Monday.

The Liberals, who released their plan in a pre-budget announcement in March, would begin with free child care for kids age 2-1/2 to kindergarten and more fee subsidies for infant and toddler care, starting in 2020. Within three years, annual provincial funding would jump to \$3.3 billion, according to the budget, which does not forecast spending beyond 2020-21.

While the two-page NDP plan sounds good, University of Toronto economics professor Gordon Cleveland says it is "completely unrealistic."

Cleveland, who was hired by the provincial government last summer to research how to make child care affordable in Ontario, says more than 160,000 infants and toddlers would flood the licensed child-care system if fees dropped to \$12 a day or less.

And yet, there are just 60,000 licensed spaces for this age group across the province, he notes. In the third year of an NDP mandate, demand for preschool spaces would exceed 181,000, far more than the current 106,000-space supply, according to Cleveland's 322-page analysis, released last month.

"The NDP plan would result in huge space shortages and long waiting lists, rather than affordable child care," Cleveland says.

That is why he recommended starting with preschoolers, a plan the Liberals embraced in their March 28 budget.

"Our analysis shows that concentrating first on one age group — 2-1/2 to 4 years — and doing it right would be a much better way to build a system of affordable child-care services for families," Cleveland says. "This information was available to the NDP, and they have chosen to

ignore it.”

In Quebec, where universal, \$5-a-day child care was rolled out over four years in the late 1990s, the government was forced to use home daycares, for-profit centres and undertrained staff to meet demand, Cleveland notes.

“The lesson from Quebec is that creating a quality system takes time,” he says.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath says if she were premier, her government would address parents’ most desperate need — infant and toddler care — with a system that promotes affordability for all children younger than 4.

“Our plan is not based on your little one’s age; it’s based on making sure everyone has child care they can afford,” she told reporters last week.

Under an NDP government, about 70 per cent of parents would pay \$12 a day or less for child care.

To tackle demand, the NDP vows to create 202,000 new licensed spots in its first four-year mandate — an increase of 51 per cent. To ensure quality, all expansion would be in public and not-for-profit centres only.

The Liberals in 2016 pledged to create 100,000 more spaces within five years. In their recent budget, they added another 14,000 preschool spaces to be created over the next six years.

Both parties talk about the need to improve child-care worker wages and working conditions, a key element in ensuring quality care. The NDP plan earmarks \$375 million immediately, if elected, to boost the starting wage for all registered early childhood educators (ECEs) in licensed non-profit centres to \$25 an hour. Currently, almost two-thirds of ECEs in Ontario earn less than \$20 an hour.

The Liberals have promised a provincial wage grid for all child-care workers by 2020 to bring ECE earnings up to the level of those working in full-day kindergarten, or between \$21 and \$27 an hour.

Lyndsay Macdonald with the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario, says the NDP’s plan “effectively upped the ante for child care in this election.”

“It’s great to see two major parties coming out of the gate with such strong child-care platforms,” she says.

The association has been calling for a provincial wage scale for ECEs starting at \$25 an hour and is delighted to see this reflected in the NDP platform, she adds.

“You can’t expand if you can’t recruit the professionals to work in the centres. So this is huge.”

However, the NDP plan’s lack of detail around support for workers and families currently using for-profit child care is a worry, Macdonald says.

“Many child-care educators work in for-profit centres and many parents rely on these centres for care,” she says. “There doesn’t appear to be a plan for them.”

Laurel Rothman, interim co-ordinator of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, is also pleased child care seems to have become an election issue.

But she agreed with Cleveland that the NDP’s plan to tackle the high cost of infant and toddler care as a first priority would be “a challenge” due to the lack of licensed spaces and trained ECEs to work in them.

“Many more ECEs are required to work with infants and toddlers than preschoolers. And they require a physical space that is more specialized,” Rothman notes.

Rothman and other advocates believe the Liberals’ promise of free child care for preschoolers is a “game-changer” and can’t be ignored.

Cleveland’s analysis “makes perfect sense ... and has completely changed the debate,” says national child-care expert Martha Friendly of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

“Building a high quality system takes time ... so you have to make choices,” she says.

Starting with free preschool care introduces the notion of a public service that builds on full-day kindergarten for 4- and 5-year-olds and mirrors what many European countries offer for this age group, Friendly says, pointing to France and Belgium.

Munday, whose mother, Tina Grainger, cares for 20-month-old Everett and Fiona, 3-1/2, when she is not in daycare three mornings a week, says families in her neighbourhood are desperate.

“She’s my saviour. There’s no way I could have returned to my job without her. It wouldn’t be affordable with two kids. I’d have to quit my job. And I make a good income,” says Munday, who works for a tech start-up.

Schoemer, who has a 2-1/2-year-old in child care and a 5-year-old in before- and after-school care, hasn’t read Cleveland’s report, but feels the Liberals’ focus on preschoolers makes sense as the next step after full-day kindergarten.

“I just think the Liberal plan is more thought-out and ultimately more doable,” she says. “But I think we’d all be happy with either party plan.”

It’s the silence, so far, from PC Leader Doug Ford, currently leading by a wide margin in the polls, that is more of a concern.

"I am worried all this may be academic, if (the PCs) don't come out with an equally strong plan," Schoemer says. "And end up getting elected."

LIBERAL AND NDP CHILD-CARE PLANS AT A GLANCE

Liberal plan:

- Free for preschoolers and increased subsidies for infants and toddlers starting in 2020;
- Provincial wage grid for all child-care workers by 2020;
- 100,000 new licensed spaces for kids younger than 4 by 2021;
- Additional 14,000 spots for preschoolers by 2024;
- Expansion favoured in public and non-profit centres.

NDP plan:

- Free for kids under 4 in families earning less than \$40,000 and an average of \$12 a day for all but the richest families who would pay full fees;
- Starting with infants and toddlers in 2019-20 followed by preschoolers the following year;
- Immediate wage hike for registered early childhood educators in non-profit centres to bring starting pay to \$25 an hour;
- 202,000 new licensed spaces for kids under 4 by 2021;
- Expansion in public and non-profit centres only.

Source: Ontario NDP; Ontario government

CHILD CARE IN ONTARIO FOR AGE 0 TO 4

- Fees are among the highest in the country and range from \$9,000 to more than \$20,000 a year;
- Affordable for just 22 per cent of families;
- 63 per cent of families would use licensed child care if it was affordable;
- 161,000 spots;
- Enough space for 23 per cent of children.

source: Gordon Cleveland

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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