

Ontario provincial election 2018^[1]

Less than a month out from the Ontario provincial election, most major parties have released their proposed plans for child care. This ISSUE file outlines party platforms, news coverage, and organizational responses to help inform Ontarian voters.

Before the leadership changes from Patrick Brown to Doug Ford, the PC party had announced a platform on child care. The current PC child care platform under Ford appears to be substantially the same except that it is no longer committed to funding 100,000 new child care spaces. It appears they are still committed to covering up to \$6,750 of child care costs for "lower-income" families using all varieties of child care through a tax rebate program.

Practically, analysis of this platform shows that even low income families who are eligible for the full \$6,750 will not be able to cover actual child care costs, as Ontario fees in regulated child care range from \$9,000 to over \$20,000 per child per year. Families who do not meet the low income criterion will still be in a position where they will be expected to pay on average 23.5% of after-tax family income per child on child care or 67% of the net income contribution of the main care giving parent.

As well, the updated platform does not address the shortage of spaces nor staff wages. Overall, the best evidence shows that providing child care funds to parents in a cash or tax measure does not translate into developing quality spaces or supporting the early childhood workforce with better wages and working conditions.

The Green Party's strategy to address 'Social Inequality and Institutional Discrimination' includes a policy for supporting women in the workplace. It is under this policy that the Green Party notes funding free child care for children under age three. The platform suggests that the party intends to support businesses to set up onsite centres to help correct the shortage of child care spaces. Although the platform acknowledges pay equity for midwives, it omits recognition of pay equity for other caring professionals, such as early childhood educators. The provincial platform also highlights "additional ECE supports".

Both the Ontario Liberal Party and the NDP have made sizeable fiscal and policy commitments to increasing the accessibility and affordability of child care for Ontario families. Both parties have also acknowledged the need for higher compensation for early childhood professionals.

The Liberal government commissioned an affordability strategy and workforce strategy to structure the party's early years platform. In the March 2018 provincial budget, the Liberal government committed \$2.2 billion over the next three years to make full day licensed child care free for all 2.5 to 4 year olds and to improve access for infants and toddlers through additional fee subsidies starting in 2020. As well, it commits to 100,00 new licensed spaces for children under age 4 by 2021 and 14,000 spaces for preschoolers by 2024 favouring the not-for-profit and public sector. The platform addresses these and promises to raise low child care staff wages through increased public funding together with the development of a wage grid by 2020. Thus, the Liberal platform acknowledges the binary concerns of affordability and child care work force wages.

The NDP platform also addresses affordability by committing to affordable child care (free under \$40,000 family income) for children under age 4, with the average cost being \$12-a-day. The NDP says they will start phasing in affordable child care for infants and toddlers in 2019-2020 and preschoolers the years after that. The NDP commits to expanding regulated spaces by 202,000 (51% or 10% per year) in the first term, as well as, explicitly committing to a starting wage of \$25 an hour for the early childhood workforce in non-profit centres. The platform also highlights the party's commitment to only use public dollars to fund not-for-profit and public providers.

Child care models similar to those proposed by the PC, NDP, and Liberal parties (tax credits, sliding scale, and free child care respectively) were evaluated in a recent affordability study authored by University of Toronto's Gordon Cleveland. Cleveland found tax credits were notably less effective, requiring families with higher incomes to pay a lower percentage of their net income. The funding approach resembling the NDP platform had issues with phasing-in the rapid expansion but dramatically improved affordability. The Liberal funding approach of free child care for children aged 2.5 to 4 together with a sliding scale for infants and toddlers was found to be the most affordable for families in all income categories.

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