

Cabinet unveils childcare policies to boost birthrate ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Cabinet yesterday unveiled a series of policies aimed at countering the nation's low birthrate, including increasing the number of public childcare centers and kindergartens, working with private institutions to promote affordable "semi-public" childcare and preschool programs, and relaxing eligibility criteria for childcare subsidies.

The government has drafted several strategies to make childcare services and preschools more accessible and affordable, and increase the female labor force participation rate, Minister Without Portfolio Lin Wan-i (林萬億) said.

It would gradually increase the percentage of public childcare centers for children younger than two from 9.3 percent to 20 percent, and the percentage of public kindergartens designed for children aged two to five from 30 percent to 40 percent, he said.

It hopes that by 2022, an additional 5,280 children would be able to enjoy public childcare services and 60,000 more would attend public kindergartens, he said.

The government would also promote a program to help private childcare centers and kindergartens become "semi-public," Lin said.

Private institutions that conform with building and safety regulations, meet the legal staff-to-child ratio and provide good services can sign contracts with the government to receive subsidies that would cover the difference between what parents can afford and their full rates, he said.

In return, semi-public institutions should allow parents to pay only 10 to 15 percent of their disposable income for the services, and raise the wages of childcare professionals and preschool teachers to at least NT\$28,000 (US\$937) and NT\$29,000 respectively, he said.

The fees families will have to pay for semi-public childcare services and kindergartens would vary depending on their income, K12 Education Administration Deputy Director-General Hsu Li-chuan (許麗娟) said.

Children from low and medium-income families would be allowed to attend semi-public kindergartens for free, while other families would be charged NT\$4,500 a month if the child was their first or second, and NT\$3,500 if they were further down in birth order, she said.

The government would also relax eligibility criteria for childcare subsidies, Lin said.

Currently, parents of children younger than three can apply for a subsidy of NT\$2,500 per month provided one of the parents are unemployed, they have not applied for a public unpaid parental leave subsidy and their income tax rate is less than 20 percent, he said.

These restrictions are to be eliminated starting in August next year, Hsu said.

Moreover, from August 2020, families with children aged three to four would be able to apply for the same subsidy, she said.

The Executive Yuan estimates that the new childcare services and preschools would benefit an additional 525,000 children, while the new childcare subsidies would help 523,000 more.

The policies would require NT\$11.3 billion this year and NT\$26 billion next year, Hsu said, adding that from 2020 onward the annual budget would be NT\$38.3 billion.

“The government will continue to expand the number of public childcare centers and kindergartens. That goal will not change. We will allocate money for that from the annual general budget as well as the Forward-looking Infrastructure Development Program budget,” Premier William Lai (2) (2) said. “Ultimately, we hope to help parents meet their childcare needs, increase the salaries of childcare professionals and preschool teachers, as well as improve the quality and availability of childcare services.”

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