

How the child-care plans of Ontario's main parties stack up ^[1]

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Source: The Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 5 Jun 2018

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EXCERPTS

If you're a parent of young children in Ontario, you've likely encountered your fair share of challenges in securing affordable, high-quality child care.

Not only are waiting lists notoriously long for licensed centres, but Ontarians pay among the highest child-care fees in Canada.

The three main political parties in the provincial election campaign have promised to ease child-care woes. But how do their plans stack up?

Let's consider a family of three children – one infant, one preschooler and one school-aged. Assuming this family has made it through the waiting lists and secured a spot at a licensed child-care centre for each child, it would currently be paying \$40 to \$97 a day for the infant, \$29 to \$72 a day for the preschooler and \$15 to \$42 a day for before- and after-school care for the school-aged child, according to the Ministry of Education's 2017 Licensed Child Care Survey Report. That adds up to \$1,764 to \$4,431 a month.

THE PROMISE:

Liberals: The Ontario Liberals have pledged to spend \$2.2-billion over three years to provide free licensed child care for children from age 2-1/2 until they start kindergarten. The party says this plan will save parents an average of \$17,000 a child.

During the May 27 leaders' debate, Kathleen Wynne said her party would work with all types of licensed care, including not-for-profit and for-profit services, in-school facilities and home daycares.

Meanwhile, the Liberals have promised to continue their plan, announced in 2016, to create 100,000 new licensed child-care spaces over five years.

For our hypothetical family of three children, the monthly child-care bills would be reduced by the amount the parents pay for the middle child. They would still be paying for child care for the infant and the school-aged child.

New Democrats: The Ontario NDP has promised free public, licensed, not-for-profit child care for families with a household income of less than \$40,000. Households that earn more would pay based on their ability, with an average cost of \$12 a day per child. During the May 27 debate, NDP Leader Andrea Horwath emphasized that the party's child-care plan applies to the not-for-profit sector, and that child care should not be for-profit.

The party says it estimates 70 per cent of families would qualify to pay \$12 a day or less, and no one would pay more than they are paying now. The NDP says it would phase in this plan, starting with care for infants and toddlers in the second year of its mandate, and preschoolers in its third year. It says it hopes it could expand the program to include school-aged children.

The NDP proposes expanding the number of non-profit, licensed, affordable child-care spaces in Ontario by 202,000 spaces.

By the third year of implementation, a family with one infant, one preschooler and one school-aged child with a household income of less than \$40,000 would be paying only before- and after-school fees for the eldest child.

If the family of three had a household income of more than \$40,000, then, based on the party's estimated average cost of \$12 a day per child under the plan, it would pay an average of about \$504 a month for the two youngest children, as well as full before- and after-school fees for the eldest child.

Progressive Conservatives: The Ontario PCs have promised a new child-care tax rebate for parents of children up to 15 years of age. The party says this rebate would be based on a sliding scale, paying up to 75 per cent of child-care expenses, or up to \$6,750 a child. This maximum rebate applies to families with a household income of less than \$34,800, according to a chart provided by the party, and the tax-credit rate decreases about one to three percentage points for every bump up in the income bracket. At a household income of \$155,095 or more, families would receive a 26-per-cent credit rate.

The PCs emphasize that their plan, unlike those of the Liberals and the NDP, would apply to more than just licensed care; their proposed

tax break would also cover independent care, babysitters, nannies and after-school programs.

In an e-mail to The Globe and Mail, the PCs said they would honour the Liberal government's commitment to 100,000 new child-care spaces.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY:

The financials are only part of the equation, says Linda White, professor in the department of political science and school of public policy and governance at the University of Toronto. When evaluating the party platforms, one must first examine how each party's plan addresses the supply for child care and the quality of care, she says.

"It's all well and good to promise a rebate or free child care, but if there is no space, then it doesn't do a family much good," she says.

Both the Liberal and the NDP platforms represent an "encouraging" move toward a universally accessible system of high-quality, affordable child care, says Laurel Rothman, interim co-ordinator of public policy and government relations at the non-partisan Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. Both parties also promise wage increases for early childhood educators, which would help attract and retain qualified staff, she says.

But, Ms. Rothman says, Wynne's statements during the May 27 debate indicating the Liberals are open to investing in the commercial sector run contrary to research that shows non-profit and public sectors provide, on average, higher-quality child care.

Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, says the Liberal plan, which is based on an extensive affordability study, seems "quite doable." The Liberals' move to expand the supply of child care for preschoolers first, before infants and toddlers, may seem counterintuitive, she says. But, in part, because it is less labour-intensive from a staffing perspective to provide preschool care, it is a practical place to start, she says.

Ms. Friendly says she appreciates the NDP's promise to move toward universal child care, but she notes that hammering out the details of its sliding fee scale may be tricky and should involve expert and community input. "I would hope that they sit down with people and figure out exactly how they're going to do it," she says.

Child-care policy experts interviewed by The Globe questioned the PC's calculations for its proposed tax rebate. They pointed out the maximum promised rebate of \$6,750 a child, or \$562.50 a month, is generally considerably less than 75 per cent of what child care costs in Ontario, where infant spots can cost up to \$2,000 a month.

"That's much lower than the cost of most child care of any type in this province," Ms. Rothman says.

She adds that low-income families would not be able to take advantage of the rebate if they could not afford to pay for child care in the first place.

The PC's promise that its tax rebate would cover both licensed and unlicensed care assumes unlicensed child-care providers such as babysitters would provide tax receipts, says Ms. White. She notes independent child-care providers are more likely to work on a cash basis.

Ms. Friendly says simply giving money to families does not deliver quality care, and questions the idea of spending public money to cover unregulated care.

"Families, what do they need? They need safe, quality child-care services that they can afford and that they can depend on. Giving people money, however you do it, has demonstrably shown not to do that," she says.

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