

# Ontario opens door to more public funds for 'big box' child care <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

The Ontario government has changed the rules to give profit-making, "big box" daycare operators more access to public funds, raising concerns among advocates that quality will suffer.

NDP child care critic Doly Begum raised the issue in the legislature on Wednesday, saying studies show non-profit daycare "offers higher standards of care and better wages for workers. This is why child-care advocates have urged the province to expand not-for-profit, child-care spaces.

"We know the biggest issue in the child-care sector is the lack of affordable, high-quality, safe child-care spaces," said the Scarborough Southwest MPP.

"By removing the for-profit threshold, this government is opening the doors to large-chain providers."

Begum also said the government's move to cut \$23 million in subsidies for low-income families is "making child care less affordable for those who need it."

The previous Liberal government had planned to spend more than \$3.5 billion over five years to create 100,000 new spots in licensed child care. At that time, advocates successfully lobbied for rules that would limit the amount of funds available to for-profit daycares — including those run by so-called "big-box" child-care businesses.

But in August, the new Progressive Conservative government quietly removed that cap, known as the "for-profit threshold."

Decades of research has found that non-profit or public child care is typically of higher quality than corporate-run centres — largely because the focus on profits impacts levels of care, staffing and standards.

Currently, about one-quarter of licenced child-care spots in Ontario are in the for-profit sector.

On Wednesday, Education Minister Lisa Thompson said the government has been "listening to parents and working with groups across Ontario and, in our mandate, we wanted to be fair to parents across Ontario and give them more choice."

With regard to corporate-run child-care, she said "we have every confidence in people who are caring for our children and the reality check is this is in response to all of Ontario ... The nanny state of the previous administration was proven not to work. We're listening to parents across Ontario."

But Carolyn Ferns with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care warned the removal of the for-profit threshold is a sign the Ford government is "just throwing up its hands and letting the market rip."

"It's a very risky decision," she said in an interview. "We know there are big corporate players that want to open and expand in Ontario. And they don't expand in a way that meets parents' needs best, they do it in a way that is most profitable for them.

"So that little rural area that doesn't have child care — that's not where they want to open."

As far as addressing parent choice, Ferns noted the province just completed a major consultation on child care with town halls across Ontario.

"The threshold was one of the things that was put in place to address concerns about protecting the province from big corporate players and if (the government) is going to reverse course without a public consultation, that's a big deal," she said.

The for-profit threshold didn't discriminate against existing so-called "mom and pop" daycares, Ferns noted.

"This is about how we are going to grow a good system for Ontarians. And prioritizing public and non-profit was a good way to go," she said.

If there are places with no non-profit child care, municipalities, the region and the province need to plan to make it happen, Ferns said.

"There is high-quality, non-profit child care in lots of small towns and regions in Ontario, including nine programs in Huron-Bruce, the

minister's riding. Those programs are there and they need support," she added.

During the election campaign, Doug Ford said a Progressive Conservative government would create a tax credit to cover up to 75 per cent of parents' child-care costs, up to a \$6,750 per child maximum. That has yet to happen.

In the legislature, Thompson said she invites "any member of the opposition to come out to my riding — out of the bubble of Toronto — and see how parents need choice. We cannot allow a continuation of parents to have to drive 25 kilometres out of their way (for child care) just to turn around to get to work 40 kilometres from there. It's not efficient, it's not effective, and it's not good for Ontario families."

Thompson can say the government is helping rural Ontario, Begum countered, but "it doesn't answer the question, 'Why aren't we having non-profit child-care spaces in rural Ontario?' Why don't we expand on that, and create more spaces?"

Smaller, for-profit centres are also worried that they'll be overtaken by large-chain corporations, she said.

Choice is fine "but quality is also important," Begum said. "We have to take care of our children with quality child-care spaces. We have to take care of our workers."

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**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

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