

The Ford government should invest properly in child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

So Toronto parents are No. 1 in the country. But it isn't for anything that will bring them any pleasure. In fact, it's cause for a lot of pain and expense.

That's because, once again, it's been confirmed that parents in Toronto pay the highest fees for child care in the country.

In a study released this past week the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives reported the cost of infant care in this city, for example, tops \$20,220 a year. That's nearly 10 times more than median fees in Montreal.

Toronto's child-care fees can, and often do, exceed mortgage payments for some families.

That's an unacceptable and often untenable squeeze on family budgets, forcing some parents out of the workforce.

It doesn't have to be this way — and it shouldn't.

The Ford government could invest wisely in child care, as so many other provinces do.

It's not only the right thing to do for families; it's the right thing for businesses and the economy as well.

Study after study shows that affordable, accessible, quality child care does the most to help women get back into the workforce, boost family incomes, improve early childhood skills for poor kids, add to government tax coffers, reduce child poverty, and shrink the wage gap.

Indeed, Ontario's previous Liberal government had planned to make child care free for all kids from the age of 2 to kindergarten, starting next year. That forward-thinking decision was based on a study it conducted that found every dollar invested in child care would add \$2.47 to the province's economy.

In other words, it would more than pay for itself, something other provinces across the country have cottoned onto.

In fact, half of all the provinces have already capped fees to rein in increasing child-care costs. That's something Ontario doesn't do, even though it's the country's biggest province.

Even tiny Newfoundland found the money to introduce operating grants in 2018 to child care centres that agreed to cap daily fees at \$44 for infants, \$35 for toddlers and \$30 for preschoolers.

Meanwhile, Quebec has had a universal child-care program in place for two decades. Fees there now range from about \$8 a day to \$22, depending on a parents' ability to pay. And British Columbia is now emulating that successful — and beloved by parents — program with its own \$10-a-day pilot project.

Not only is Ontario not following the evidence, never mind the lead of other provinces, it's taking a step backwards.

Instead of progressively investing in child care, the Ford government has promised to spend \$389 million on a child-care fee tax rebate that will do anything but offer parents "choices," as it claims.

First and foremost, it's because it'll be very hard to make that amount of money stretch far enough for the 2.2 million Ontario children under the age of 14. And rebates do nothing to make child care itself more affordable.

The centre's study cited Quebec as an example. Since the mid-2000s the province has offered parents who use private centres a child-care tax rebate to help cover the cost. But it's nowhere near as effective as set fees for saving parents money while providing quality care.

In fact, parents who use private centres pay fees that are two and three times higher than those in publicly funded programs, something that Quebec's investment of \$800 million — a lot more than Ford's promise of \$389 million — in rebates doesn't make up for.

Most importantly, tax rebates don't create new daycare spaces any more than tax rebates for transit fares will build subways.

Nor is quality as high in Quebec's private centres as it is in the province's subsidized programs, says Martha Friendly, who co-authored the centre's report.

"You don't create accessible, affordable and quality child care by sending (parents) a cheque or giving them a tax rebate," she points out. The Ford government should nix its planned rebate and instead invest in tried and true programs that will help out kids, parents and society as a whole.

Related link: Developmental milestones: Child care fees in Canada's big cities 2018 [3]

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