

# Child-care workers urge Ford government to keep wage grant <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Burlington child-care worker Kaitlyn Legge had to pick up two extra jobs — as a shop clerk and children’s birthday party organizer — due to chronically low wages in the career she loves.

“I couldn’t afford to live on my own,” said the early childhood educator (ECE), who earned \$14 an hour for four years until she moved to another centre last fall.

Legge’s new hourly rate of \$16, along with the province’s \$2-an-hour child-care wage-enhancement grant, allowed her to move out of her parents’ house and start building an independent life. But Legge, 26, still struggles to keep up with student loan payments and other bills.

“If the government took away the \$2 wage grant, I would honestly be looking for a job in another field,” she said. “The government does not understand the sacrifices we make.”

Legge is among more than 12,000 early childhood educators across Ontario who have signed a petition urging the Ford government not to axe the wage grant in its spring budget.

But despite the petition — introduced in the legislature by six Liberal and NDP MPPs over the past week — Education Minister Lisa Thompson refused to assure workers the grant will continue.

Instead, Thompson told the legislature Thursday that “parents have been asking for choice,” a response questioned by NDP child-care critic Doly Begum.

“I don’t think this is about choice — this is about pay equity,” Begum said in an interview with the Star.

“It’s about respecting a sector that employs women,” added the MPP for Scarborough Southwest.

If government doesn’t continue paying the wage grant, families will pay the price through higher fees, she warned, noting Ontario has the most expensive child care in the country.

The grant, worth \$203 million in 2018-19, was introduced by the previous Liberal government in 2015 to boost wages for child-care workers and to narrow the gender wage gap in the predominantly female workforce.

It applies to all front-line staff in child-care centres earning less than about \$27 an hour, or the average wage of ECEs in full-day kindergarten. More than 39,000 child-care workers are eligible.

“I can’t tell you how anxious people are about this,” said Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, who was in the legislature with 23 other ECEs from across the GTA Thursday to hear Thompson address the issue.

Child-care workers receive between \$2,000 and about \$5,400 a year from the grant, depending on their wages and the hours they work, she said.

“This is something that affects people’s standard of living and actual day-to-day pay,” Ferns said. “The funding ends in a month and we still haven’t heard what the government plans to do.”

New mother Kalinda Jessett, 33, says she supports the grant because it contributes to a living wage and quality child care.

“I don’t want my son to go to daycare where staff is always leaving because they can’t afford to work there,” said Jessett, whose 10-week-old baby is on wait lists at 11 child-care centres near both her Chinatown apartment and job in downtown Toronto.

“I want him to build a relationship with his caregivers. I would like to build a relationship with his caregivers. Those relationships are what build quality in child care,” she said.

Jessett, an event planner for a mutual fund company, is also worried centres will raise already eye-popping parent fees to keep staff from leaving, if the Progressive Conservatives kill the wage grant.

“One of the centres (where her son is wait-listed) is charging \$2,595 a month — that’s more than my rent,” she said.

Amy O’Neil, director of Treetop Children’s Centre in Toronto’s Oriole Park Public School, said child care has become a revolving door as workers seek better-paying jobs in the school system or other fields.

The wage grant was a way to encourage staff to stay in the profession and build a career, she said.

In O’Neil’s non-profit centre, ECE’s earn more than \$27 an hour, so are not eligible for the grant. But five early childhood assistants, who earn \$19 an hour, rely on the grant to boost their hourly wages to \$21, she said.

“If it is cancelled, it will have a huge effect on morale and staff retention,” she predicted. “It will really devalue the profession and the work we do.”

Municipalities that administer the wage grant on behalf of the province have asked the education ministry about the future of the payments and have been told “it’s business as usual,” said Shanley McNamee, Toronto’s acting general manager of children’s services.

Toronto receives about \$40 million a year in wage grant funds “and would certainly want to see it continue,” she said.

“Although there has been no signal that is going to disappear, it’s a new government and you never know,” she added.

According to provincial statistics, 16 percent of ECEs and 57 percent of non-trained staff in child-care centres earn less than \$15 an hour.

Under the previous Liberal government, the wage grant was supposed to continue for another year until a provincial wage grid for child-care workers was introduced in 2020. The wage grid was part of a broader workforce strategy to improve working conditions and encourage more ECEs to build careers in the sector. But with the new government, advocates fear those plans may also be at risk.

**Related link:**

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

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