

Ford government balks at restoring child care fund that helped keep parent fees down ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Ford government is not restoring a \$50 million fund that helped daycares keep fees down for parents, despite the premier's pledge this week to reverse provincial child care cuts.

The fund was a "one-time" measure introduced by the previous Liberal government to cover increased labour costs to daycares after the minimum wage was increased to \$14, a spokeswoman for Education Minister Lisa Thompson said Tuesday.

"As was confirmed in the budget, the fee stabilization support will not be continued," said Kayla Iafelice.

"The previous Liberal government suddenly raised Ontario's minimum wage by more than 20 per cent, a move that was unmanageable for Ontario's child care sector," she said in an email.

"Instead of reacting to the previous government's short-sighted policies, we are continuing to support the sector by investing more than \$2 billion in child care and early years, including 30,000 new child care spaces, the new Childcare Access Relief from Expenses tax credit, or CARE, continuing the wage enhancement grant, and the home child care enhancement grant," she said.

But Toronto Councillor Mike Layton, who protested child care cuts outside a daycare in Premier Doug Ford's Etobicoke North riding last week, said parents will pay the price.

"This was on the chopping block and all of us assumed it would be brought back after the premier's comments," he said. "But it appears they are not exactly telling us everything."

The city was facing an estimated \$84.8 million in cuts to local child care programs, including the loss of 6,166 fee subsidies, before Ford announced Monday he was cancelling retroactive budget cuts to child care, public health and emergencies services.

In total, Toronto was facing \$177 million in cuts that the city warned would jeopardize services.

Without the child care fee stabilization fund, worth \$8.3 million to Toronto, parents could see their costs jump by an average of 4.7 per cent this year, Layton said.

"It is concerning the province is leaving that (cut) on the table," he said. "It's not an efficiency, it's downloading the cost to parents."

On Monday, Toronto Mayor John Tory said he welcomed the opportunity to work with the province to find efficiencies, but would not put city services at risk.

City staff are still trying to understand the impact of Ford's announcement, said Karen Gray, interim general manager for Toronto Children's Services.

"Staff are working through all of these details now ... and will report to executive committee next week and then council," she said in an email Tuesday.

Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care said without the extra provincial funding, centres will have to raise fees in a province where parents already pay the highest costs in the country.

In Toronto, the cost of infant child care tops \$20,000 a year.

"The minimum wage went up and those costs still exist," she said. "I don't think the province is being straight with people. To say one day 'everything is going back to pre-budget levels' and the next day to say, 'except for this,' is just jerking people around."

The province quickly needs to clarify what is happening because "child care programs can't run on rumour," Ferns added. "It's not fair to put programs and families in this situation. Fees are going to go up because this funding has been cut. And that is just not OK."

NDP child care critic Doly Begum said the Ford government is "creating chaos" for child care in Ontario.

“This is another cruel cut by the Ford government that will hurt families and make child care even more expensive than it already is in Toronto and in cities across the province,” she said. “We should be investing in affordable, licensed, publicly-delivered child care for the good of every Ontarian as well as our economy.”

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