

Advocates urge ban on child care waiting list fees in B.C. ^[1]

The Ontario government banned waiting list fees for daycares in 2016 but about 13 per cent of centres surveyed in B.C. still charge them.

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EXCERPTS

Child care advocates say it is time B.C. catches up with Ontario and bans daycare waiting list fees, which can cost parents hundreds of dollars without guaranteeing a spot.

The Ontario government banned the fees in September 2016, ordering licensed child care centres and home child care agencies to “no longer accept payment to place a child’s name on a waiting list that may or may not lead to the child being offered child care,” whether or not the fee was refundable.

But in B.C., where a shortage of child care spaces has some parents putting their children’s names on multiple lists, hundreds of centres still charge fees or deposits, which advocates say can range from \$20 to \$200 each.

The B.C. Ministry of Child and Family Development said in an emailed statement that child care facilities can use waiting list fees or deposits at their discretion.

The ministry recently added questions about the fees to an annual survey of licensed child care providers, and found that about 69 per cent of more than 4,400 respondents kept waiting lists. Roughly 13 per cent of the providers with lists charged a fee or deposit, however, about 45 per cent of them said they would be refunded, according to the ministry.

A report last year by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives found that 27 per cent of child care centres in Burnaby and 26 per cent in Surrey charged a waiting list fee in 2018. In Richmond, seven per cent charged the fees in 2018 and in Vancouver, three per cent.

Martha Friendly, founder and executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, said they stopped asking about waiting list fees for the upcoming annual report, which she co-authored, because the fees vanished in Ontario following the ban.

“In this area, policy makes a difference,” Friendly said. “I was really surprised that none of the other, more progressive governments didn’t follow suit.”

Friendly said B.C. would be wise to follow Ontario, where the former Liberal government banned the fees following a petition by two Toronto lawyers and private member’s bills from a New Democrat and Liberal MPP.

“Certainly it’s not ethical in light of the fact that we know that parents are already squeezed by the fees, and that lower income parents are particularly squeezed, and that childcare spaces are at a real shortage,” Friendly said.

“What you’re asking parents to do is fork out money multiple times just to put their name on multiple waiting lists because we have this marketized childcare system.”

Katrina Chen, Minister of State for Child Care, said she is looking into the issue in B.C.

“For too long there wasn’t a coordinated system to provide access to affordable child care that families so desperately need. In the absence of a plan and investments in child care by the old government, waiting lists became a reality,” she said.

“Wait list fees are one of the many aspects of the system we are looking at as we develop a coordinated system that works for all families.”

Lynell Anderson, a child care and policy researcher, said evidence shows that it’s important to remove any barriers to accessing quality child care, including the fees.

“In B.C. and most of Canada, given the current realities, this leads to a primary focus on making services broadly available with affordable parent fees,” Lynell said in an email.

“However, waiting list fees can also be a barrier for families. As more spaces are created, there should be less need for waiting lists and related fees. We don’t pay fees to go on a waiting list for Grade 2, nor should we for child care.”

The Vancouver Society of Children’s Centres, which operates about 800 spaces at 16 facilities, stopped collecting waiting list fees in 2012.

“There are so many people looking for spaces,” said Bernice Scholten, chief executive officer.

“We’ve got a waiting list of over 2,500 and we just don’t want to create barriers for families. In fact, we encourage families to put their name on as many waiting lists as possible just to ensure they’re not holding out hope to get into one of our centres and losing an opportunity elsewhere.”

Scholten said the train of thought had been that a refundable \$50 fee, to be credited toward registration, would prevent parents from adding their child’s name to the list if they didn’t truly intend to register.

But the extra administrative process also proved to be cumbersome so they cancelled the fees and returned the money.

Sharon Gregson with the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C. said the fees aren’t a top concern for new parents, who are often more shocked to learn how many waiting lists they must join.

“The reality is that when you start looking for child care and realizing that it costs you hundreds of dollars just to get on waiting lists, that’s just the precursor to the potentially hundreds or even thousands of dollars it can cost you to actually access a licensed space,” she said.

“The whole thing is a disaster and chaos for most families.”

Gregson said some non-profit centres might charge a small fee – \$20 – to cover the costs of labour and software to manage hundreds or more names on a list.

But “for some operators, it’s a bigger revenue stream, and it’s part of their operations and creation of profit,” she said.

Gregson said a more effective way of making child care more affordable is creating enough quality, licensed spaces, similar to how parents can find spaces in an elementary school for their children.

“Then we wouldn’t need to have issues around waiting lists and the fees at all,” she said.

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