

Child care is essential to our economic recovery^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents are accustomed to putting their children on daycare wait lists long before they're ready to attend — sometimes even before they're born. Then, if they're lucky enough to get a spot, most can look forward to paying the equivalent of a sizable monthly mortgage and years of stressful daycare dashes racing from work to make pick-up time.

Given all that, parents must be feeling like they're witnessing some alternate version of reality right now.

After all, during the pandemic, Ontario has offered free child care to essential workers. And it's available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to suit the working schedules of parents, whatever that might be.

Originally this child care was limited to registered health-care workers and first responders, but it has expanded, along with our understanding of essential workers, to include everyone from grocery store clerks and food processing workers to long-term-care home workers and even truckers.

And Ontario's Education Minister Stephen Lecce was quick to connect the vital importance of child care to the government's staged reopening of the economy itself.

"Every member of this government understands how critical child care is to getting our economy on track and how important those centres are to permitting parents, and especially women, entering the job market," Lecce said. "We get that."

That may come as a surprise — albeit it a very welcome one — to the parents, economists and child care advocates whose contention that accessible, affordable child care is vital to Ontario's economic growth and progress have seemed to fall on deaf ears with this government.

Ontario is not the only province to have come around so suddenly to the importance of child care. Most provinces are providing free emergency child care for essential workers. Quebec has already said it will expand access to all workers in the early stages of its planned reopening.

But Quebec has long been light years ahead of other provinces when it comes to providing widely accessible and affordable child care. It's in Ontario where the change in tone has been nothing short of extraordinary.

The Ford government, after all, killed a promising child-care plan when it came to power in 2018. It replaced the Liberal government's plan to make child care for preschoolers free with a tax credit for any type of child care, including babysitting and summer camp.

The following year in its very first budget it put forward child-care cuts and policy changes that jeopardized thousands of subsidized daycare spaces for low-income parents in Toronto — the city with the most expensive child care in the country.

On top of that, the Ford government rolled back a planned hike in the minimum wage, which would have helped many of the women working the low-paid frontline jobs suddenly deemed so essential in the pandemic. And it stalled pay transparency legislation designed to reduce the longstanding pay gap for women.

So the question now is how many of these political statements about the vital importance of child care and the social and economic lessons of this crisis will be carried over in the post-pandemic world?

If the Ford government really has come to "appreciate the relationship" between child care and economic recovery, as it claims, it must take steps to stabilize the existing child-care system and create the more robust system Ontario's families and economy have long needed.

The first step is to help ensure all the child-care centres that have been closed for two months, with no parents fees coming in to pay the bills, actually reopen.

The sector was in bad shape before the pandemic hit. Staff are paid low wages, there aren't enough government subsidies to create the necessary affordable spaces, and full-fee parents are unable to pay any more. And going forward it may be necessary to reduce occupancy limits for safety because of COVID-19, putting the centres on even shakier financial grounds.

This is true of many small businesses, of course, but the government can't afford to let any child-care centres fail. Economic recovery depends on people being able to work. And as governments across Canada have acknowledged by making child care free for essential workers during the pandemic, child care is essential for labour force participation.

Even before the pandemic there wasn't enough regulated child care, and in most communities it was far from affordable. This is the time to change that.

Government funding for child care provides direct jobs for women, who have suffered higher job losses and reduced hours in the pandemic, and it enables other women to rejoin the workforce.

The pandemic has laid bare the many things that don't work well in our society — from long-term care homes to employment insurance to child care.

How Ottawa and the provinces move forward will be evidence of whether governments have learned from this crisis and intend to rebuild in a better way. Or whether governments, like Ontario, that weren't big on child care before simply return to their old ways and hope no one notices.

If that happens we'll all lose, and our economic recovery will take even longer.

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