

Early childhood educators call for free child care as Ontario economy reopens ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario's free emergency child care for essential workers should be expanded to support all families as the economy reopens in the wake of COVID-19, according to an online survey of almost 4,000 early childhood educators from across the province.

"The time for free child care is here," says the report by child-care advocates to be submitted to Queen's Park on Wednesday.

Such a move might triple the province's annual \$1-billion child care spending, based on costs reported by emergency child care operators, the report acknowledges.

"But if child care is truly an economic priority, this is the financial commitment that we need from our federal and provincial governments," argues the report by the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (AECEO) and the Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare (OCBC).

Education Minister Stephen Lecce has said child care is a "prerequisite" for parents — particularly women — to participate in the workforce

On May 19, he announced that "a gradual reopening of child care is expected to begin when the province is ready to transition to Stage 2 based on public health criteria."

Although Lecce promised "robust safety protocols for the safety of Ontario's youngest learners and their staff," the report says, the Ford government's "reckless record of child care cuts and deregulation" before the pandemic does not instill confidence.

"We need every partner and ally to demand nothing less than a safe, supported reopening that protects children, families, educators and programs," the report says.

Before Ontario closed licensed child-care centres March 17, to slow the spread of the coronavirus, programs relied on full enrolment and parent fees that can top \$2,000 a month. But that model is not sustainable during a pandemic, as family finances are in disarray and child-care programs will likely be operating at reduced capacity for months in response to the need for reduced group sizes, the report says.

Current public-health safety protocols for emergency child care limit the number of children and staff to just 50 per centre; most programs limit group sizes to six children and two staff.

In addition to full public funding, staff and administrators want clear provincial guidelines and training from public health, increased paid sick and emergency leave days, smaller group sizes, additional staff and supports and paid planning time before reopening, the report says.

"Children and families require quality, meaningful and thoughtful care in safe and decent work environments as we slowly reopen Ontario," said Alana Powell, executive co-ordinator for the AECEO. "But this is not possible without our early-years programs and our early-years workforce."

As child-care staff think about returning to work, the survey shows they are most concerned about their personal safety and having access to necessary resources such as personal protective equipment (PPE), extra sanitation supplies and enough staff to support smaller group sizes.

They are also worried about being able to "engage in ethical, caring practice" amid increased safety protocols, according to the report.

In an open-ended question, many survey respondents listed a need for increased wages, phased reopening to ensure safety and more recognition and respect from the government.

In addition to the survey, the advocacy organizations behind the report have been consulting regularly with child-care staff and program administrators through webinars, online training and weekly conference calls during the pandemic.

Based on these consultations, the report recommends that child-care programs remain shuttered until the province meets its own goals for Phase 2. This includes a consistent two- to four-week decrease of new daily COVID-19 cases, daily tests of at least 16,000, increased

access to PPE, fewer new cases in hospital and a decrease in cases that cannot be traced to a source.

Once the province has released new safety protocols and funding plans, programs will need at least three weeks to make the necessary changes before reopening, the report says.

“We only have one chance to get this right and ensuring adequate time and support to prepare will help to make that happen,” said Carolyn Ferns of the OCBC, an advocacy group that represents non-profit operators and staff.

Melissa Boekee, 26, an ECE who has been working in emergency child care with Compass Early Learning Centre in Lindsay, said the small-group model of six children with two staff per room has helped her develop close relationships with the children while keeping them safe.

“Even though we are implementing stricter screening measures and not interacting with children or staff from other rooms, we’re still doing this for the children,” she said. “It is important to keep their social, physical and emotional well being in the forefront of our minds.”

Since social distancing is not possible with small children, the key to safety in reopening child care amid an ongoing pandemic is smaller group sizes, the report notes. But that means programs won’t be able to serve the same number of families as before.

As a result, the province should develop guidelines to help centres determine which families should get access first when programs reopen, the report recommends.

Child-care programs should consider placing siblings together in family-age groups to keep “social bubbles” small, rather than grouping children by age as is the traditional practice, the report suggests.

The province should also let programs use shuttered schools, recreation centres and outdoor playgrounds to accommodate the increased need for physical space as a result of reduced group sizes, the report says.

Paid sick days and emergency leave should be increased to at least 21 days for all child-care staff. Pandemic pay of \$4 per hour should be extended immediately to all program staff to ensure a \$25 hourly minimum wage for all ECEs. And vulnerable staff should have access to alternate work arrangements or the ability to refuse work and continue to be paid, the report recommends.

“The child care sector holds innovative ideas and key expertise that will be crucial for a successful reopening,” Powell said. “We want to be included in provincial planning.”

As for the hefty price tag, Ferns said the province shouldn’t be left holding the bag.

“This has to be the shock that really gets the federal government involved in child care,” she said. “And it’s not only money. They need to bring leadership as well.”

Related link: From reopening to recovery: A plan for child care reopening in Ontario and moving to a publicly funded system

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