

Stephen Lecce's letter to parents doubles down on the Ford government's half-baked child care plan ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

On Saturday, Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce took to social media to try to quell the backlash at the Ford government's spectacular bungling of Ontario's child care reopening. After a week of in-person and virtual protests and an open letter topping 20,000 signatures, Lecce was presumably feeling the heat from a child care plan that commentators have called a "hot mess."

Lecce tried to turn the page by penning a letter to parents. Unfortunately for parents, children and early childhood educators across Ontario, the minister's attempt to make nice only served to underscore the problems with the Ford government's approach to early learning and child care.

The letter didn't change anything about the plan, it simply repackaged it. As if putting a week of mismanaged announcements, memos and guidance documents together into a list of crisp bullet points was all that was needed. But the concern about Ontario's child care reopening plan runs deeper than a communication issue. It's a policy and funding issue.

The Ford government's reopening plan failed to provide sufficient notice, funding, space, training or support to ensure a safe child care reopening for Ontario's young children. It also failed to recognize that we are not dealing with a short-term issue. The COVID-19 pandemic should force us to reimagine our child care system, to put it at the core of social and economic recovery.

Perhaps the key failing of Lecce and his staff has been not listening to the people who primarily provide early learning and child care in Ontario: early childhood educators (ECEs). Lecce's letter to parents trumpeted that the Ford government's plan was "developed in consultation with Ontario's chief medical officer of health and medical experts." Those are important voices, but what the plan lacked was consultation with the very people expected to carry it out.

In May, the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario conducted a survey of nearly 4000 ECEs and early years staff about what they needed for a safe and successful reopening plan. Their responses formed the core of the 27 recommendations in our report **From Reopening to Recovery: A Child Care Plan for Ontario** ^[3].

These recommendations have been roundly ignored by the Ford government:

- We recommended a three-week notice period before reopening. We were given three days.
- We recommended expanding emergency child care programs to serve more families. These vital services are being shut down by the end of the month.
- We recommended fully base funding programs to give centres what they need to operate safely, while providing parents with relief from fees. We got vague funding guidelines that do not increase the provincial child care allocation.
- We recommended clear eligibility criteria for families. Instead ECEs are supposed to serve as gatekeeper to families scrambling for less than half the child care spaces that we had before.
- We recommended repurposing available public space so that child care programs could meet higher capacity while respecting low group sizes. Crickets.
- We recommended raising pay and protections for ECEs, who will be on the front lines, keeping our children safe and helping them to navigate and recover from the trauma a global pandemic. Instead, the minister gave ECEs a "thank you" — it's hard to pay the bills with that.

So, if Premier Ford and Minister Lecce are scratching their heads and wondering why so many child care centres are refusing to open their doors until this hot mess is fixed, perhaps they should put their listening ears on. Instead of doubling down on the current child care reopening plan, it is time to think hard about how we could create a better child care system for Ontario.

Of course, this isn't a problem that Ontario is facing alone. Every province and territory is stumbling along, some better than others, as we try to grapple with a child care crisis that we can no longer ignore.

It's time for federal leadership, strategy and funding to finally deliver a competent child care system as social infrastructure that will not

only support parents in the workforce, but ensures decent work so educators can provide the care that helps our young children recover and thrive.

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[2] <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2020/06/15/stephen-lecces-letter-to-parents-doubles-down-on-the-ford-governments-half-baked-child-care-plan.html>

[3] <https://www.childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/20/05/reopening-recovery-plan-child-care-reopening-ontario-and-mo>

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