

As many as 56,000 Toronto children could be without a daycare spot under Ontario's plan to reopen child care: Toronto officials ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As many as 56,000 Toronto children could be without a daycare spot under Ontario's plan to reopen child care across the province, according to a city councillor.

"There is no plan here," Coun. Joe Cressy said Friday. "The province has announced the reopening of child care without a plan to ensure access to child care for parents who need it."

City modelling shows that of about 80,000 licensed spaces in Toronto child-care centres, just 24,000 will reopen because of strict new provincial guidelines released this week, he said. The numbers will be even smaller if some centres decide they cannot reopen under the circumstances.

"As usual, we have no concrete details from the province, so we're trying to figure this out quickly," he said in an interview.

"But from these early rough calculations, it's pretty clear: there is a plan for how to safely operate child care, but there is no plan in this province for how to deliver it," added Cressy (Ward 10, Spadina—Fort York), who also chairs the City's board of health.

"They have no plan to expand the capacity, nor do they have a plan to pay for it."

Premier Doug Ford announced Tuesday that daycares across the province could reopen starting Friday as long as they followed stringent safety measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The measures, described in a 20-page guideline document, are similar to those for emergency child-care programs operating for front-line workers. They include screening of all staff and children, enhanced cleaning, a ban on visitors, a limit of 10 people (staff and kids) per room, and the removal of all toys that can easily spread germs.

But new, smaller group sizes mean fewer children can be served and less revenue will result from parent fees. As the province is prohibiting centres from raising parent fees, advocates and operators have been wondering where the extra money will come from.

Funding guidelines released by Ontario's Education Ministry on Friday show centres will be able to access provincial funding as well as time-limited federal-provincial pandemic wage and rent subsidies and an unspecified amount of child-care money from Ottawa.

"Between resumed provincial funding, parent fees and federal programs, staffing costs will be met, including any gaps left by federal programs," the guidelines say. Operating costs and rent "should be met" in the same way.

Any additional costs related to enhanced cleaning and personal protective equipment will also be covered by the province, the document says.

Mayor John Tory, who earlier Friday expressed concern about child care funding, welcomed provincial assurances that the reopening will be "fully funded with no undue pressure to operators, families or municipal budgets."

"This is good news for families, for child care operators and for municipalities, and I thank the premier and (Education) Minister Stephen Lecce, and the governments for agreeing with these objectives," he told reporters.

Tory said the city expects a "gradual reopening" of 47 city-run child-care centres starting Monday, June 29, as it winds down emergency child care and works to ensure parents using that program find alternative arrangements.

Eleven city-run centres are expected to reopen June 29, with an additional 10 centres reopening throughout July. Another 19 are aiming to open in September, while seven centres are on hold "pending further analysis," he said.

"Reopening child-care facilities is an important milestone in our recovery journey and will help parents and guardians as more and more workplaces reopen," he said.

“While it won’t be a risk-free environment, our staff will be doing everything they can to make it safe for children and child-care staff to return and have the systems in place to respond should anyone come in contact with COVID-19,” he added.

Tory said he will continue to advocate with the provincial and federal governments to expand child care in the city and keep an “eye out” for the capacity of the system overall.

As daycares reopen, Tory said he expects many families will either keep their children home for the summer or be “too anxious” to use the system.

But he said he would be watching for “when people do return, that there is space for the ones that were there before, let alone all the needs we have that weren’t being met before the pandemic.”

Reduced capacity for child care is part of the province’s phase 2 reopening plan, said Shanley McNamee, general manager of children’s services for the city.

“Moving into stage 3, ideally in September, that capacity will increase,” she told reporters. “Ultimately, over time, centres will be able to return to their full operating capacity.”

Until then, the province has suggested centres give priority to front-line health-care workers and then to parents working outside the home and families with “special circumstances.”

But it will be up to each daycare to assess their own families’ needs, McNamee said.

Toronto mother of two Roxanne Stewart-Johnson is worried her sons’ downtown daycare will not be able to afford to reopen.

Stewart-Johnson, a single mother who is completing a master’s degree in journalism at Ryerson University, said during the shutdown she’s been helping her five-year-old son, Ben, with his home schooling, while also looking after Salem, 2. She squeezes in her own study time whenever she can throughout the day.

The boys have attended Catholic Settlement House Day Nursery, and Stewart-Johnson has kept in touch with the director every couple of weeks for updates.

Because her children have been there for about two years, she’s been told they will be able to return — if the centre opens up.

The director is worried about purchasing, even sourcing, personal protective equipment and all the safety protocols with limited funding, given not all students can return for safety reasons, Stewart-Johnson said.

Until “it is sorted out, she doesn’t know if she can open.”

Stewart-Johnson said worries about COVID-19 don’t compare to her worries about the centre remaining closed.

“I have no idea what I am going to do,” she said, noting it would be difficult to find other daycares, given there were long wait lists before COVID-19 restrictions.

“I am just praying for a miracle right now.”

Child-care operators and advocates are also concerned about the capacity of the system.

Amy O’Neil, director of Treetop Children’s Centre at Oriole Parkway Junior Public School, said her 155-child program will be limited to just 24 children under the new rules.

About three weeks ago, a parent survey showed about 35 families wanted care, she said.

“Now that the reopening has been announced, I expect that more will want to come,” said O’Neil, who is co-chair of the Toronto Community for Better Child Care.

With all of the new safety guidelines, she doesn’t expect her centre will be able to reopen until at least mid-July.

The Ford government has been saying for months that child care is an “essential service” and Education Minister Stephen Lecce has called child care a “prerequisite” for reopening the economy, she noted.

Despite a detailed report based on a survey of more than 4,000 child-care operators [3] and staff calling on the province to consult them on how to reopen safely and give programs at least three weeks’ notice to plan, Premier Doug Ford’s Tuesday announcement gave the sector just three days.

Safety guidelines weren’t released until eight hours after Ford made the announcement. And most centres, including her own, haven’t yet seen final funding guidelines, she added.

“It certainly doesn’t instil confidence,” O’Neil said.

Lecce said Ontario is committed to protecting children’s safety and “the financial interests of families.

“That is why we unveiled a plan that will enhance health protocols, keep students safe and not impose higher fees on working parents,” he said in a statement to the Star.

“Our plan was reviewed by the best medical and scientific minds in Ontario, imposing the strictest standards to keep our youngest learners safe,” he said.

“We know that child care is critical to our economic recovery. That is why we are providing more financial support and guidance to child-care operators to ensure a sustainable sector. It is also why we are providing clear health guidance to ensure our staff and kids remain safe.”

The number of centres able to reopen on Friday, or those awaiting provincial permission to do so, is not yet available.

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