

Less than half of Ontario daycares have reopened with school six weeks away^[1]

Author: Meyer, Lucas

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EXCERPTS

Less than half of Ontario daycares have reopened since all were allowed to back on June 12, despite Premier Doug Ford saying on several recent occasions that the sector is back to 91 per cent of its pre-COVID-19 outbreak levels.

"We're at 91 per cent of capacity," Ford said Wednesday while referencing a conversation with Education Minister Stephen Lecce. "I said 'well, we need to get it up to 100,' he assures me we'll get it up to 100."

Ford repeated the same figure on July 17, saying "we have 91 per cent of daycare operators open, we want to hit 100 per cent, so I don't know why they'd want to close the whole system down" when answering a question about why the Halton Board of Education had stopped developing plans for part-time school because there wasn't enough daycare availability.

But the Ministry of Education has confirmed that of Ontario's 5,523 daycares, only 2,265 have since reopened, an increase from 2,066 from July 14th, after repeated requests for updated numbers.

"So that's just not right," Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care policy coordinator Carolyn Ferns said.

So where is the 90 per cent figure coming from?

Last Monday, the government announced that as of July 27th, cohorts at daycares would increase from the current limit of 10 to 15, which would "bring the child care sector to approximately 90 per cent of its operating capacity before the COVID-19 outbreak."

Lecce has said the decision reflected operators wanting the freedom to prepare for cohorts increasing, which he reiterated in the Legislature during Question Period Tuesday.

"To ensure that our operators have the PPE, the cleaning supports and the financial support that enables them to be sustainable for the decades to come," he said. "We are ensuring that, yes, institutional child care is supported, but we also give parents the choice of where they choose best to raise their children. That flexibility, that support for universalizing access is important."

However, the government has not laid out a goal for when exactly its capacity will be reached, with a spokesperson clarifying the 90 per cent figure is for the whole sector - if all daycares were to reopen.

"I think it's very irresponsible for those comments given the context and the reality of the situation," Ferns said, especially considering only 200 more have reopened in one week.

What's in the government's favour is that as Lecce has said, daycares were given several weeks to prepare for the cohort increase and as they become effective July 27th, reopenings could accelerate over the next six weeks before school starts.

But Ferns says she struggles to see how the remaining 3,258 could open in time given the challenge of finding more space and more staffing, in order to meet safety protocols.

And she said the larger picture is that even if the sector reached full capacity, there's still a massive shortage of child care spaces in Ontario.

"100 per cent capacity for the child care system still only serves 30 per cent of children in Ontario, we still have wait lists for child care," she said.

On Thursday, Lecce acknowledged the 40 per cent figure for the first time.

"Under the groupings of 10, the first phase of that plan, we're realized roughly 40 per cent have reopened, so we're well on track to getting that capacity online for working parents and doing so in a safe manner," he said. "So we are confident that we're going to get to where we need to be in the context of building up capacity, giving moms and dads in Ontario that absolute confidence that they will have a space."

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