

Child-care advocates warn Ontario daycares may not fully reopen in fall ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child-care centres across Ontario will be allowed to operate at full capacity as of September, Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced on Friday.

But critics say without more support from the province, it will be difficult to keep the promise that every daycare spot will return — and that the long-term stability of an already-shaky sector is at risk.

Daycares “may start to reopen come the fall, sure,” said Carolyn Ferns, policy co-ordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, an advocacy group.

“But we know that some are choosing not to reopen at this stage, and I worry that some will close permanently.”

She added, “This is not a short-term issue. What has happened with the pandemic has taken the foundation out from under child care. It’s a very precarious sector right now.”

Ontario began permitting child-care centres to reopen on June 12 with small cohorts of children and staff. In mid-July, they were permitted to expand to approximately 90 per cent capacity.

On Friday, Lecce said that the province’s plans for reopening schools “will also include a safe reopening of the child-care sector to permit operators to reach that full capacity as of Sept. 1.”

“It’s a promise the premier and I have made to moms and dads of this province, and it’s a promise we intend to keep,” he said.

A spokesperson for Lecce said Monday: “We know that child care is critical to the province’s recovery from COVID-19. That is why our government has supported the sector at every stage of the outbreak through tailored funding and operating approaches designed to support the sector and families.”

After daycares were closed in March, the province worked with the federal government and the child-care sector to “maximize all available support under Canada’s COVID-19 Economic Response Plan and provided funding for fixed costs,” Alexandra Adamo said.

Now, as centres reopen, funding is available for “enhanced staffing levels” to cover added demands such as screening, cleaning and coverage, Adamo said.

“We are providing immediate relief to ensure child care remains sustainable in communities across Canada.”

According to Adamo, approximately 2,500 of the province’s 5,523 licensed child-care centres have reopened — 45 per cent — and about 200 more will reopen on Tuesday.

Ferns says that child-care operators are skeptical that the promised funding will materialize, and that trust in the provincial government is the lowest she has seen in her career in the sector.

But funding isn’t the only problem, Ferns added. Many are struggling to hire back staff who may be hesitant to work for low wages in a potentially risky environment, and are anxious about the return to full capacity.

“I think there’s a lot of concern in the child-care community about that, because — and this is similar to what’s happening in schools — there really isn’t enough physical space in centres to be able to do that safely.”

Early childhood policy researcher Kerry McCuaig notes that amid staffing pressures and other challenges, many child-care centres were under capacity even at June and July’s reduced levels.

“I think the main challenge is parents’ comfort with the health and safety of their kids going back,” said McCuaig, a policy fellow at the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development, at the University of Toronto’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Whether daycares are struggling to reopen spaces or struggling to fill them, the financial pressures are significant, Ferns said: along with high parent fees and low staff wages, many centres rely on operating at full capacity to meet their bottom lines.

McCuaig believes immediate funding shortfalls are not daycares’ biggest concern, noting the federal government’s recent \$625-million

commitment. Rather, the long-term lack of infrastructure to support child care in Ontario, in contrast with the school system, means individual centres are often scrambling.

“This is child care’s perennial problem. COVID has exposed it, and money on its own is not going to fix it.”

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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