

Ontario's child care sector gets \$147 million funding boost to offset costs linked to COVID-19 pandemicv ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child care advocates welcomed Thursday's joint federal-provincial announcement of an additional \$147-million to support licensed child care providers in Ontario, but they hope it's the last money spent to prop up the current child care system before a new, more expansive one takes its place.

"This has to be the last announcement that's just keeping the doors open or keeping the status quo," said Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare. "Because we need both the federal and provincial governments to start shifting to looking at what the long-term plan is for child care."

Ferns said she is hoping the federal government will have more to announce on child care in its throne speech later this month. "We should see (the COVID-19 pandemic) as an opportunity to move child care to a more solid place," she said.

The funding announced in Toronto Thursday — by Ahmed Hussen, the federal minister of families, children and social development, and Stephen Lecce, Ontario's minister of education — is meant to bolster early learning and child care centres that have struggled during the pandemic by assisting them directly with their operating costs.

"This will offset the associated costs of COVID-19 closures and reopenings in Ontario," Hussen said.

As of this month, child care operators in Ontario are permitted to operate at full capacity, although only about 60 per cent have reopened and most are operating at a reduced capacity, Ferns said. "Things really are on a precipice. Hopefully this money will go to shore that up in the immediate term, but we have to move child care to a better place."

Lecce said the decision to reopen has to be made by the operators themselves.

"We're doing everything we can from a government's perspective to incent our operators to reopen as soon as they can, knowing that at the end of the day, safety has got to be the guiding principle. When they are ready, when they are safe, they will reopen."

Last year, Doug Ford's government cut \$80 million from licensed child care, arguing that the costs should be borne by municipal governments. In response to a question Thursday about last year's cuts, Lecce said his government remains committed to ensuring parents have access to affordable child care, citing the child care tax credit and other investments.

"Last year alone ... 19,000 net new spaces were created as a consequence of good government action at all levels to really encourage the private and non-profit sector to step up and create more access."

Thursday's funding is an extension of the bilateral Early Learning and Child Care Agreement signed by Ottawa and the previous provincial government under Kathleen Wynne in 2017. Ontario has also received more than \$200 million in federal funds for child care through the Safe Restart Agreement.

Both Hussen and Lecce stressed the importance of child care in terms of the reopening of the economy, repeating that it was not a convenience or a luxury, but a necessity.

Ferns said the politicians' rhetoric doesn't match the reality for many families.

"I just kept hearing both ministers say, 'Child care is not a luxury, it's a necessity,' but it's a necessity that parents have to pay nearly \$2,000 a month for — sometimes more," she said. "If it's a necessity, how can we continue that? How can parents in the face of an economic recession be expected to continue to pay the highest child care fees in the country?"

Martha Friendly, the founder and executive director of the national Childcare Resource and Research Unit, said the fact Ford's Progressive Conservative government is continuing the agreement that was initially signed by the previous Liberal government is a good thing, but Thursday's funding does little more than maintain the status quo for a beleaguered system that requires a much more substantial reimagining.

"It's not a roll back, but it's not a roll forward either," she said. "We need to roll forward into building a system."

Like Ferns, Friendly said the way forward needs to be a national child care program.

"If you really want to have results from child care, if you want to have quality, reliable child care that stands up in a crisis so you can run the economy, you have to build a system."

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