

Ottawa considering tying provincial money for child care to a new set of national standards ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

OTTAWA—The federal government is considering tying money for child care in the provinces to a new set of national standards, but has yet to decide how to make care more affordable or whether private providers can be part of the system, the Star has learned.

The Liberal minority government pledged in its September throne speech to “make a significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early learning and child care system.”

A government source — who spoke on condition they not be named so they could discuss emerging policy — told the Star the Liberals are looking at establishing a nationwide set of standards, and then providing funding to provinces and territories to meet them.

But details still need to be sorted out, the source said. That includes how much money Ottawa will put up, and whether the standards will call for a flat daily fee for child care, similar to what already exists in Quebec, or peg costs according to parents’ income, among other options, the source said.

The government also hasn’t decided whether private child-care providers — predominant in Alberta, for instance — will be allowed under the national standards, so long as they meet broader quality specifications, the source said.

“There’s definitely a lot of challenges with different provinces having significantly different ways to implement their early learning and child care systems,” the source said.

As advocates for a national system are quick to point out, this is not a new discussion. It has been 50 years since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommended the creation of a national child care policy. The Liberals promised to create one, but didn’t, in 1993, 2004 and 2011.

Since taking power in 2015, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s government has increased funding to provinces through a series of bilateral agreements for child care. During the COVID-19 pandemic, several of these deals were renewed and Families, Children and Social Development Minister Ahmed Hussen increased funding by \$625 million to almost \$1.2 billion for the 2020-21 fiscal year.

But as Sheridan College professor Monica Lysack explains Canada still has a “patchwork” of child-care programs across the country that she says a national program needs to address, to ensure every family has access to high quality, affordable care.

“What we really need to do is transform and move from this market that we have right now where child care is a private business and a private responsibility, to a public approach to publicly funded and managed,” said Lysack.

As it stands, there are four provinces that have at least 50 per cent of their child-care spaces with set fees, according to a 2019 report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA): Quebec, Prince Edward Island, Manitoba and Newfoundland. In Ontario, the child-care system is a mix of licensed spaces in daycare centres and agencies that provide home care, as well as thousands of spaces in unlicensed home-child-care businesses.

The province also has some of the most expensive child-care costs, particularly in the GTA. The CCPA report, which surveyed costs in 37 cities in October 2019, found Toronto was the most expensive city in Canada for infant and toddler care, with a median monthly cost of \$1,774 and \$1,457 respectively. By comparison, infant care in Montreal — which falls under Quebec’s set-fee system — was \$179 per month, the report said.

The time is ripe for change, with the need for an economic relaunch after the pandemic that ensures greater workforce participation — particularly of women — during the rebuild, said Andrew Bevan, who was chief of staff to former Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne.

Bevan is calling on Ottawa to establish a “child-care secretariat” of experts to guide new standards for the promised national system. Ottawa should also increase annual funding for this system, starting with another \$2 billion and rising to \$10 billion in five years, he said.

“In order to get the workforce back to where it was previously, more care is going to have to be made available,” he said.

The New Democrats are on board with the general idea. In an interview, NDP MP Leah Gazan said Canada needs a “universal child care program.” The system should include increased wages for child-care workers, Gazan said. The government also needs to put up more money to “stabilize the system” amid the pandemic, which has forced closures of child-care centres, she said. A spokesperson for Ontario’s education ministry told the Star on Nov. 12 that five per cent of all Ontario child-care and home-care agencies were still closed.

“It’s time that governments get serious, particularly governments that say they’re feminists, to support a robust and universal child-care system to ensure that all people can access,” said Gazan.

The federal Conservatives are warier about the Liberal plans for a national system. Jamie Schmale, the Ontario MP who is the Tory shadow minister for social development, said it would be better for the government to give child-care money directly to parents “creating another yet another government program” in provincial jurisdiction. Conservative Leader Erin O’Toole has called for converting existing federal spending on child care to refundable tax credits for all parents with child-care needs.

“We want to ensure whatever this program is going to be that it ensures flexibility for parents, it ensures the widest variety of options possible because every child is unique,” Schmale told the Star recently.

Helen Ward, president of the Kids First Parent Association of Canada, says the idea of a national child care system unfairly emphasizes daycare centres and child-care providers over parents who choose to care for their children at home. She argues the government should stay neutral on the question of child care and says any new money should be distributed equally to all parents.

“Looking after your own child is work, and it’s honourable work and it’s essential work and it should be regarded as such,” Ward said.

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[funding](#) ^[5]

[universal child care system](#) ^[6]

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