

The Ford government needs to treat child care as the essential service it is ^[1]

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EXCERPT

It shouldn't have taken a global pandemic to prove what parents – especially mothers – have known for decades: child care is an essential service.

But in the early days of the crisis even the Ford government seemed to get it, which is saying something since the Progressive Conservatives used their 2018 electoral win to axe an ambitious plan to give all Ontario parents access to free or low-cost child care.

Ontario was one of the first provinces last spring to offer emergency workers free, around-the-clock child care with enhanced safety protocols.

But since then, the Ford government has reverted to type.

Despite allowing child care to remain open when second wave restrictions hit after Christmas, Ontario has left centres on their own to manage the risks. Federal safe re-start money is finally flowing to help pay for the extra personal protective equipment and to cover costs when centres were closed last spring. But to expect child care to operate during the current lockdown without extra provincial funds or safety measures is irresponsible.

Parents working in health care, grocery stores, factories and other front-line services – Ford's so-called "heroes" – don't have the luxury of working from home. They need child care to do their jobs and they need those programs to be as safe as possible.

The province's lack of support has also put child-care workers – the backbone of this essential service for parents – at considerable risk. A quarter of all COVID-19 cases in child-care centres since the pandemic began last spring have occurred in the past two weeks. And two-thirds of those cases have been among staff.

This is clearly a problem for everyone, now that a more contagious variant of the virus is circulating in Ontario.

Sadly, the government's refusal to respond to the child care community's calls for extra support is just another example of the province's failure to protect the public during the pandemic.

If we don't want child-care centres to become new vectors for infection, the province should fund a return to the smaller group sizes that were introduced in centres after last spring's lockdown. Arguably, the decision to lift those safety precautions last fall was premature.

In recognition of their chronically low wages and the greater risk child-care workers face during this health crisis, Ontario should bring back the \$4-per-hour "pandemic pay" introduced last spring. That way the government can help slow the ongoing exodus of child-care staff for safer, better paying and less demanding jobs.

Finally, the government should provide paid sick days, or at least top up Ottawa's emergency program that offers just \$500 a week, so that workers aren't out of pocket if they become ill or have to self-isolate for 14 days. If workers are not supported, they will vote with their feet and leave centres – and parents – scrambling.

It's outrageous that the government continues to expect "the nice ladies of child care" to figure out how to keep their programs safe without the necessary resources.

Many have had enough. The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care estimates that more than 200 centres across the province have closed since the spring – at least 133 of them permanently.

No one knows the long-term impact this will have on families desperate for child care. It's certainly not good for women whose jobs have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and who are watching a generation of economic gains disappear.

A child care crisis – which is what Ontario has – does not bode well for parents today, nor does it set the stage for the province to "build back better" once the health crisis lifts.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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