

**Author:** Kennedy, Brendan  
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For child care advocates, some of whom have been fighting for a national child-care system for half a century, Monday's federal budget was an emotional culmination of decades of hard work.

"People were in tears," said Carolyn Ferns, a spokesperson for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, who watched the budget announcement while on a Zoom call with more than a hundred advocates from across the country. "It was just so overwhelming to get the sense that finally a government had listened to what everybody had been calling for, for so long."

The child-care commitments in the Liberal budget were surprising to even the most seasoned observers:

- A \$30-billion investment over five years;
- A 50-per-cent reduction in average parent fees by the end of next year;
- An average of \$10-a-day child care across the country by 2026;
- A commitment to spend a minimum of \$9.2 billion on an annual basis;
- Enshrining that spending in legislation to be introduced this fall.

Ferns said she wished it hadn't taken a pandemic for the government and the public at large to grasp the importance of affordable child care to the economy, and particularly women's participation in it. But she said she's hopeful "the penny has finally dropped."

Before the money can flow, however, the federal government needs to sign bilateral agreements with each of the provinces and territories, which are responsible for delivering child-care services.

The federal commitments do not appear to be conditional on any increase in spending by the provinces, but experts interviewed by the Star suggested that the federal government could require the provinces and territories not to reduce their current spending levels.

"I can't see how [Ontario] could say no to this," Ferns said. "It's a chance to make a real turning point for child care, and to create a system that will really help families and make child care affordable for them at last. How could they turn it down?"

Given that provinces with progressive governments, such as British Columbia, will be quick to embrace the federal money, "provinces that don't get on board are going to look terrible," Ferns said. "The federal government's bringing real money to the table, so I think that the Ford government has to accept this. If they don't, I don't think families would forgive them for it."

In a written statement, Ontario's Education Minister Stephen Lecce said that although he welcomed increased federal support for child care, "Ontario needs long-term financial support that is flexible to respond to the unique needs of every parent, not a one-size-fits-all approach."

Lecce trumpeted his own government's introduction of the Child Care Tax Credit, which provides an average of \$1,500 to more than 300,000 eligible families.

"We are prepared to work with all levels of government on providing families with safe, affordable, and flexible child-care options to ensure parents can access child care in their communities that meets their needs."

Morna Ballantyne, executive director of Child Care Now, said regardless of ideological differences it's going to be "extremely difficult" for any province to turn down Ottawa's offer to finance \$10-a-day regulated child care within five years.

"I don't think any objections will be understood by the voters in those provinces," she said, adding that she's convinced most provinces will be eager to work with the federal government.

"It makes good sense for them to collaborate because they too need to build an early learning and child-care system that is going to provide a much more secure and better bridge for women to access the paid labour force."

Ballantyne's main worry, she said, is a lack of understanding among the public for "the enormity of the project ahead" and the time it will take to build the system. She fears that impatience could turn to cynicism.

That's partly why she was impressed with the government's clear timelines of cutting fees in half by next year and getting to the \$10-a-day average in five years. The clock is already ticking.

So while Monday was a celebration, Ballantyne said she woke on Tuesday with a sense of urgency about what lies ahead. "There's a huge amount of work to be done very quickly."

**Region:** Canada [3]  
**Tags:** federal budget [4]  
national child care system [5]

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