

Ottawa and provinces must get deals done to make national child care a reality ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There's a great deal to like in the Liberal government's ambitious plan for \$10-a-day child care — and not just for parents who are busy adding up the thousands of dollars they could save.

It's good news for employers needing workers and everyone interested in permanently growing Canada's economy to pay the COVID debts that governments are accumulating on our behalf.

Accessible and affordable child care helps women work and provides jobs for yet more women, and both those outcomes boost the economy. That's why study after study have found that public child-care spending more than pays for itself.

The plan laid out by Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland in Monday's budget dramatically increases federal spending (\$30 billion over five years) in an area that has primarily been left to the provinces, and it seems to be grounded in the right principles and vision for a true child-care system.

Ottawa will work "with provinces and territories to support primarily not-for-profit sector child care providers to grow quality spaces across the country while ensuring that families in all licensed spaces benefit from more affordable child care."

"Primarily not-for-profit" and "grow quality spaces" are exactly the kind of statements that child-care advocates have been waiting to hear. It's no wonder, then, that so many of them were high-fiving on Twitter as the budget was unveiled.

The Trudeau Liberals clearly understand the value of an affordable child-care system, something that too many provincial governments, including Ontario's Ford government, do not. And they're willing to share the cost of supporting such a system to the tune of billions in new annual funding.

Unfortunately, all that does not automatically mean that parents with children in regulated child care will be paying half the fees they pay by the end of next year, as the plan calls for, and \$10 a day five years from now.

To make anything approaching that happen will require an extraordinary level of provincial buy-in. Or, as Freeland puts it, "this is about a series of bilateral negotiations."

Those won't be easy. To know just how hard some of those negotiations will be we need look no further than to Ontario Finance Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy's statement on the budget.

He opened with a complaint that stricter border measures weren't included. Then he went on to problems with vaccine supply, the federal sickness benefit and the need to dramatically increase the federal health transfer, a longstanding provincial complaint.

On the budget's signature proposal for affordable, accessible child care, which would provide Ontario with billions in new funding for a desperately needed service, Bethlenfalvy had not a single word to say.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce's statement directly addressed child care but, if anything, was even worse for it.

He started off by touting the province's existing child care tax credit, which has done nothing to reduce the costs of regulated child care or expand those spaces. Then he went on to "welcome increased support for child care" from Ottawa that is "flexible" and "not a one-size-fits-all approach."

That's code for "just give us the money and we'll spend it as we see fit." We already know that, if the federal government were to give in to that demand, parents in Ontario would likely get more tax credits, which don't create the cost-capped affordable child-care system that is rightly being proposed here.

The Ford government likes tax credits, which it claims provide "choice for families" but in reality amount to little more than babysitting money for families most in need of quality child-care programs.

In its budget last month, the Ford government managed to recognize that “women in particular have been disproportionately affected” by COVID job losses. Yet it declined to take any bold moves to actually do anything about it.

Those are the challenges Freeland faces in Ontario.

Quebec, which already has the kind of child care system the rest of Canada needs, will cut its own deal for a share of the new federal money. And that will only embolden other provinces to argue for their own version of flexibility in spending the money — even if it bears no resemblance to the national child-care system that Freeland is promising.

When asked about the challenge of getting the provinces on board, Freeland diplomatically noted they need time to digest what she’s offering. Rather gamely she added that she’s “looking forward” to those conversations.

Freeland has to negotiate her way into deals with the provinces to bring the promise of \$10-a-day child care to life. But she must stand firm enough that those agreements still produce a true national child-care system.

It’s in everyone’s interest that those deals get done, and without undue delay. The pandemic exposed just how necessary child care is for working mothers and the economy.

Canadians, suffering through the third wave of the COVID pandemic, are in no mood for political squabbling on much of anything. They want solutions that move their lives and the economy forward. This national child-care plan can do both.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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