

Election could 'shape the future of child care in Ontario' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Negotiations between the federal and Ontario governments for a deal to pay for child care are on hold during the election period, while advocates and strategists in the battleground province wait to learn what the vote's outcome will mean for the sector's future.

"If the Liberals are re-elected, majority or minority, I think it's full steam ahead for the agreement," said Carolyn Ferns, the public-policy coordinator of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

"If it's a Conservative government, our message is that they're really making a mistake in saying they would abandon child-care agreements that have been signed with eight provinces and territories of every party."

On the campaign trail, the federal Liberals have trumpeted their plan to provide \$10-a-day child care, on average, by 2025-26.

"We have done deals with NDP governments," said Liberal candidate Chrystia Freeland in the Toronto suburb of Markham last week.

"We've done deals with Conservative governments (and) Liberal governments. We've done deals in the north, and we've done deals in the south.

"We have really shown that it's possible today in Canada to build the universal, high-quality and affordable early learning and child care that Canadian parents, Canadian women, and Canadian children need and deserve," Freeland said.

The NDP platform makes a similar promise, while the Conservatives propose scrapping the Liberals' child-care deals. They'd also replace the deduction for child-care expenses with a refundable tax credit covering up to 75 per cent of child-care costs.

"We're going to help all parents immediately, not some six years from now," said Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole last week when asked to explain the rationale for his plan.

"Parents know what's best, particularly with the flexibility needed for families coming out of the pandemic, and with shift work and other things," he said.

O'Toole's plan mirrors Ontario's child-care tax credit, and if the Conservatives win, families could take advantage of both tax credits, if the provincial one were kept in place, said Mitchell Davidson, executive director of the StrategyCorp Institute of Public Policy and Economy, and Premier Doug Ford's former executive director of policy.

"Erin O'Toole's child-care plan would pay for the child-care plan that Ontario already has in place, thereby enabling Premier Doug Ford to choose how he wants to redistribute his existing child-care money for an even more generous plan," said Davidson.

"If O'Toole's policy was put in place, and Ford kept his policy on top, Ontario would have the most generous child-care tax-credit system in the country."

The Conservatives will need to educate the public about their plan if they win, said Dasha Androusenskov, a research consultant with Summa Strategies.

"I think that, when people really understand what the plan is, parents would hop onto this idea immediately," she said, adding that the tax credit would give families the "freedom of choice."

"They don't want the federal government to choose who can access it and which daycares can get it," said Androusenskov, referring to the Liberal plan. "They want to make that choice for themselves."

But advocates argue that a tax credit won't necessarily help families access care.

"I've heard the analogy that a tax credit is like a coupon for an out-of-stock item, if we're talking about child care," said Alana Powell, executive coordinator of the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario. "If it's not available, it doesn't matter if you have a tax credit."

Along with a \$10-a-day cap on fees that's geared to income, Powell and Ferns want Ontario and Ottawa to reach a deal that also includes a

salary grid starting at \$25 an hour.

Both said they hoped a deal would have been signed before the election.

"There's a lot more at stake now," because Ontario hasn't made a child-care deal with Ottawa yet, Powell added.

An official with the Ontario government called talks with federal counterparts "extremely constructive."

"We are happy to continue those discussions, but now that an election has been called, we understand those talks may have to wait, with the federal government now in caretaker mode," the source said.

A spokesperson for Employment and Social Development Canada confirmed that negotiations of child-care deals are currently on hold.

"During the election, routine government business continues," wrote Marie-Eve Sigouin-Campeau. "Negotiations and signing of new agreements are deferred during this period, in keeping with the caretaker convention (guidelines on the conduct of ministers, ministers of state, exempt staff, and public servants during an election)."

Amy O'Neil, director of a non-profit daycare in Toronto called the Treetop Children's Centre, said it's "disheartening" that talks were paused, and she's concerned the election is "potentially putting the deal to bed."

"But I do feel that child care will be one of the critical issues of this election," said O'Neil, adding that the vote "will shape the future of child care in Ontario."

"Whether I was in the sector or not, this will be a defining issue for my (and most of my family's) vote," she said.

But while child care is on the minds of many parents, educators, and operators, voters should keep in mind that the Liberal plan, for example, would require buy-in from provinces, as opposed to other issues that are the purview of the feds only, Androusenkov said.

Before the election period and after the federal government announced its first deal with British Columbia, opposition parties at Queen's Park urged the Ford government to follow suit and sign an agreement "as soon as possible," with Ontario Green Leader Mike Schreiner making the request again on Aug. 25. At the time, Ontario's Progressive Conservative government said it needed "long-term financial support that is flexible to respond to the unique needs of every parent, not a one-size-fits-all approach."

But hopes that Ontario would be the second province to make a deal were soon quashed. So far, Ottawa has reached agreements with Nova Scotia, the Yukon, Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: federal election 2021 ^[4]

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