

Ottawa and Ontario inch toward child-care deal^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Now the federal election is over, negotiations to fit Ontario into Ottawa's child-care plan can resume — and sources on both sides say they're headed in the right direction.

The federal budget that passed in the spring includes up to \$30 billion over five years to lower the cost of child care in Canada to an average of \$10/day by 2025-26. The plan requires buy-in from each province and territory, which are responsible for their own child-care and early-learning programs.

"We remain optimistic we will come to an agreement with Ontario that delivers affordable, accessible, inclusive, and high-quality child care for families," said Mikaela Harrison, a spokesperson for Families, Children and Social Development Minister Ahmed Hussen, in an email on Tuesday.

Ontario is one of five provinces and territories that haven't reached a child-care deal with Ottawa. The Liberals promised during the election to "finalize agreements with all remaining provinces and territories."

The Ontario government sent its terms to Ottawa days before Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called the election on Aug. 15, a source in Ontario Premier Doug Ford's office told iPolitics on Tuesday.

Federal Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland and Ontario Finance Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy were also discussing the plan "multiple times a day" just before the election, the source said, while Ford's chief of staff, James Wallace, had also been in regular touch with the Prime Minister's Office.

The source refused to provide the information without anonymity, which iPolitics granted.

A total of 1.5 million children age nine or under live in Ontario, the most of any province.

Child care is also most expensive in Ontario's biggest cities. Parents in Toronto pay the most: \$22,000 a year for infant care, \$19,000 for a toddler, and \$15,000 for a preschooler, according to a recent analysis by a progressive think tank.

The source in Ford's office said Ontario has adamantly refused any agreement that lowers costs but doesn't increase child-care spaces.

"We want to ensure this is a sustainable program that can meet the demand," the source said.

The Trudeau government's 2021 budget also commits \$8.3 billion per year after 2025-26 to keep costs low.

"Future objectives and distribution of funding, starting in Year 6, would be determined based on an understanding of need and progress achieved as part of this initial plan," the budget reads.

Considerations specific to Ontario — such as how the deal would take the province's full-day junior kindergarten into account — are also why it's taking Ontario longer than other provinces to reach a deal with Ottawa, according to the source in the premier's office.

It's always been the federal government's plan to strike different deals with each province, said Harrison, Hussen's spokesperson, because each has different early-learning and child-care problems.

"Of the eight bilateral agreements we have already signed with provinces and territories, no two agreements are identical," Harrison said.

The existing deals all promise the following, however: an average of \$10/day child care by 2025-26; more regulated spaces to ensure accessibility and inclusivity; and significant investment in educators to ensure good-quality care and fair wages, according to Harrison. The agreements haven't been made public.

But the Ford government needs to try for a deal with Ottawa "as soon as possible," Ontario NDP child-care critic Bhutla Karpoche told iPolitics on Tuesday, because the cost of care in the province is so high.

"We need to have universal, affordable child care in Ontario," Karpoche said.

Region: Ontario^[3]

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