

# Opinion: Has the pandemic really changed Doug Ford? A decent child-care deal would be a start in proving it <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Ferns, Carolyn

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## EXCERPTS

As I was listening to the recent Ontario throne speech, I couldn't help but think of Premier Doug Ford's apparent collegiality with Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland.

In Freeland's first budget speech back in April, child care was a core plank. But in Ontario's throne speech, child care was not even mentioned. It wasn't mentioned in the paragraph on federal collaboration, nor in the section on the province's economic recovery, or even in the paragraph on making Ontario "the best place in the world to do business, work and raise a family." That part mentioned building roads and highways — but forgot child care.

Early in the pandemic, Ford mused about how the health crisis was changing the way he viewed partisanship and collaboration. He spoke last year about his admiration for Chrystia Freeland. And following the recent federal election, Ford said "COVID-19 doesn't care about partisanship" in his message to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

It is hopeful to see such claims from a politician long known for his my-way-or-the-highway approach. But if Ford is being honest about his change of heart, it's time to show it — and the issue to show it on is child care.

Child care was a central issue for the federal Liberals in the election, and is a personal priority for Freeland, who is also the federal minister of finance. On election day, a strong majority of Canadians voted for a party (Liberal, NDP or Green) that supports the federal child-care plan. Everyone, from parents to chambers of commerce, now agrees that a real child-care system is key to our social and economic recovery. And the child-care community has developed our own road map to take us from our current patchwork to a universal system.

To his credit, Ford has said that he's open to an agreement, which could flow more than \$10 billion in federal child-care funding to Ontario. But the fact that an agreement still hasn't been signed means that there must be roadblocks for Ford — issues that haven't stopped eight other governments of all political stripes from signing on with ease.

The federal government's goals are all simple and positive for Ontario families and the child-care sector:

- Lower parent fees, at first by 50 per cent and then to an average of \$10 per day.
- Improve child-care workers' wages.
- Expand public and non-profit spaces.

These objectives are all reasonable, at least to anyone not clouded by partisanship. Who would dispute lowering fees for families? After the immense work put in by early childhood educators during the pandemic, could anyone object to improving their wages, especially if we want to recruit and retain a greater number of qualified educators? And with a strong public and non-profit child-care sector ready and willing to grow, why would committing to its expansion slow down progress on a deal?

And yet there is no agreement. Since the federal election, more than 3,000 Ontarians have added their voices to a petition calling for Ford to sign on.

It's time for Premier Ford to have another chat with Minister Freeland. Maybe he could get a lesson from her Task Force on Women in the Economy about how critical child care is to our recovery.

Ford says that his Conservatives are "the party saying yes." So, premier: say yes to child care. Say yes to lower fees for parents, decent pay for educators and expanding non-profit spaces.

It's true that COVID-19 doesn't care about partisanship — and neither do Ontario's children and families.

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** advocacy <sup>[4]</sup>

federal budget 2021 <sup>[5]</sup>

universal system <sup>[6]</sup>

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