

Ottawa, Ontario draw lines in the sandbox before child-care talks ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Officials from the Ontario and federal governments will meet Wednesday to find middle ground in Ottawa's offer to help all provinces, including Ontario, lower child-care costs to \$10/day.

The plan is a major part of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's agenda. The Ontario government wants to join the system, but it must see a "fair deal" first, Education Minister Stephen Lecce said Tuesday.

"We hope to land a deal that is fair as soon as possible, because child care is inaccessible and unaffordable," he said.

Ontario and New Brunswick are the only provinces that haven't signed on to the national plan envisioned by Ottawa. Nor have the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, because of unique infrastructure challenges in the North, which Ottawa says it's working to fix.

Ontario has the most expensive child care in the country. Care for a toddler costs almost \$19,000, on average, in Toronto, and about \$15,000 in much of the Greater Toronto Area.

Ottawa's plan is to split costs with the provinces and territories to lower fees for regulated child-care spaces to an average of \$10/day, per child, within five years. It also wants to reduce fees by 50 per cent by the end of next year.

Federal and provincial officials will meet virtually on Wednesday.

The two sides still haven't agreed on key conditions, including those that would give Ontario a sweeter deal than what the other nine governments got.

One sticking point is cash.

The Trudeau government promised to spend \$29.8 billion over five years to create its daycare program, including \$2.5 billion for Indigenous child care. The provinces and territories were each offered a slice of \$27.2 billion, based on their share of Canada's population of children age 0 to 12, meaning Ontario was offered \$10.2 billion.

Last week, Ford said he wants a deal like the one Ottawa reached with Alberta, which offers "more per capita."

The \$3.8 billion Alberta is getting is significantly more per capita than what Ontario was offered. But Alberta's population is younger and has a higher percentage of 0- to 12-year-olds than Ontario does.

By taking what Alberta received and what Ontario's been offered and dividing each by its 0-to-12 population, Alberta is getting about \$150 more per child.

The nine agreements Ottawa has reached with the provinces and territories "all follow (the) per-child model," said Mikaela Harrison, spokesperson for Karina Gould, the federal minister of Families, Children and Social Development.

Lecce has also said Ontario wants the agreement to take into account the province's full-day kindergarten system, which costs \$3.6 billion and amounts to child care for 260,000 four- and five-year-olds. But his government hasn't said how, exactly, it expects Ottawa to do this.

Ontario also wants a longer deal than any other province or territory. According to Gould, all nine deals are for five years.

Lecce has said Ontario doesn't want a program that balloons in cost when those five years are up. Ottawa has promised "at least" \$9.2 billion a year to sustain the system after 2025-26. Future funding "would be determined based on an understanding of need and progress achieved as part of this initial plan," said the budget that unveiled the plan.

Ottawa also says it's still waiting for Ontario to send a formal "action plan," which acts as an official proposal. Ontario sent it negotiating terms before the election, and Lecce has written a letter to the federal government stating Ontario's priorities, but neither of these was the action plan the feds say is needed before negotiations can proceed.

In its throne speech today, the federal government said reducing child-care costs was a “major” part of its plan to rein in the rising cost of living.

The government also said that some provinces it’s made deals with will start reducing daycare costs as early as January.

“Investing in affordable child care — just like housing — is not just good for families,” Gov. Gen. Mary Simon read from the throne speech on Tuesday. “It helps grow the entire economy.”

Lecce talked about the negotiations after a reporter asked him about them at an event on Tuesday in Mississauga, just west of Toronto, where the minister was announcing \$600 million to: build 26 schools; renovate 20 others; and add daycares to 32 schools, where 1,500 children could receive licensed care.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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