

Opinion: As Alberta signs the federal agreement, everyone is asking: Where is Ontario's child care plan? ^[1]

Author: Ferns, Carolyn

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EXCERPTS

Alberta has signed onto the federal child care plan. This leaves just two provinces — Ontario and New Brunswick — without agreements. At Queen's Park on Monday, Premier Doug Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce were in the hot seat about why Ontario continues to delay signing onto the federal plan.

Federal Minister for Families, Children and Social Development, Karina Gould, shared during a press conference that in the seven months that Ontario has had to work on it, they still have not submitted a child care action plan. Did the dog eat Doug's homework?

As the weeks have stretched into months, Lecce has offered excuses for not signing a child care agreement. At first he claimed that Ontario wasn't being offered a fair share per its percentage of the population — a claim that turned out to be either false or the result of bad math by the province's education minister.

Now, Lecce claims that Ontario's full-day kindergarten program makes it "unique" and in need of extra funding. This argument, too, doesn't hold up to scrutiny. Every province and territory has, over the years, undertaken a variety of early learning and child care initiatives. Some have full-day kindergarten or pre-K programs, others already provide more operational funding to child care programs resulting in their lower fees.

But the intent of the federal funding is not to pay provinces for existing programs. The purpose is to lower child-care fees for families, increase wages for educators and expand public and non-profit child care programs — not to give Ontario a cookie.

While Lecce's claims do not hold water logically, factually or mathematically, they have served one purpose: to distract Ontarians from the fact that the Ford Conservatives have no plan for child care. And that they seemingly cannot find it within themselves to commit to the basic principles of child-care system-building that nine other provinces and territories have agreed to.

Lecce has continually used the word "flexible" when talking about what Ontario wants from the federal plan. This is generally understood to be code for the province not wanting to commit to two important features in many of the existing child-care agreements: a wage scale for ECEs, and prioritizing expansion in the public and non-profit sectors. If these are the real reasons holding the Ontario government back, they should be ashamed of themselves.

After everything that ECEs and child care workers have given over the pandemic, who could continue to deny them decent work and pay — especially if you are being offered federal funding to make it happen.

And of all the provinces that have already signed onto the federal plan, Ontario is one of the best positioned to meet the objective of expanding the public and non-profit child care sectors. Three-quarters of our child care spaces are already provided by these sectors; they are ready to grow.

If Ontario is delaying the federal agreement on these grounds then they are letting ideology and partisanship get in the way of a game-changing program for families and one of the key policies to power our province's social and economic recovery.

In the absence of provincial leadership on child care, municipal leaders and the child care community are stepping up. Toronto, Niagara, and Hamilton councillors are all putting forward motions to explore direct child care agreements with the federal government. A last resort surely, but a sign of municipal frustration with the province.

Meanwhile, the child care community has developed our own Road map to Universal Child Care in Ontario, which the current (or any future) Ontario government can use. We lay out the policy interventions that the Ontario government could undertake to meet the federal objectives — and deliver affordable child care for our province's families.

Since the Ontario government still hasn't submitted its action plan, they can feel free to use ours. We don't mind if they copy our homework.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: federal budget ^[4]

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