

Why is the Ontario government not protecting child-care workers?^[1]

Child-care providers are holding the rest of Ontario together right now. Yet the government acts as if they are invisible, Luisa D'Amato writes

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EXCERPTS

More than 1,000 people lined up in the cold this week to receive free rapid test kits at a Kitchener shopping mall.

These were “pop-up” giveaways — temporary, quick, and only helpful to those who a) knew about them and b) had the free time and physical stamina to take advantage of the offer.

What a thoughtless way to hand out valuable resources.

Why couldn't those tests have been saved instead for people working in child care?

Child-care providers, whether they are working from their homes or in a centre, are literally holding the rest of Ontario together right now.

Yet they have nothing in the way of protection for themselves or the vulnerable children they care for because COVID-19 infections are peaking, schools are closed and students are home.

Some of their parents are essential workers. Premier Doug Ford promised that these workers would have emergency child care while schools are closed but, at the same time, his government is undermining the ability of those child-care workers to do their jobs:

- They have no N-95 masks to protect them against the fast-spreading Omicron variant.
- They are not receiving HEPA filters from the government to help purify the air.
- They are not on the priority list for tests, either PCR tests or the less accurate (but still a whole lot better than nothing) rapid tests. Schools are included on the list, but child-care centres are not.
- They are not being prioritized for booster vaccines, either.

“We hope we’re going to have enough staff to stay open,” warned Kelly Birch-Baker, director of operations for Emmanuel at Brighton Child Care Centre in Waterloo.

The centre provides care for about 120 children between 18 months and five years old.

Until recently, frequent testing provided reassurance. But now tests are in short supply, and “we have no way of knowing” if people have COVID-19 or not, she said.

This is particularly dangerous for these children, who are too young to be vaccinated or wear masks.

“I feel defeated and disrespected,” said Shelley Secrett, a registered early childhood educator at Emmanuel.

“They just are not listening to us.”

Without access to tests, staff with symptoms must stay home and isolate, not sure if they have COVID-19 or a simple cold.

If too many staff are unable to work, the centre won't be able to run its programs.

“It's beyond frustrating. It's dangerous,” said Carolyn Ferns, public policy and government relations co-ordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

Ford's promise of free emergency child care for essential workers is supposed to allow them to keep working while schools are closed.

That means the government would pay the costs, and child-care centres would make more space available for the older children, perhaps in centres located within the empty schools.

But because the child-care sector has been treated so negligently, “what I'm hearing from people is they've already experienced staffing shortages,” Ferns said.

“They’re being expected to pivot, open emergency child care, and they just cannot do it.”

Opposition MPPs Catherine Fife of Waterloo and Laura Mae Lindo of Kitchener Centre wrote to Education Minister Stephen Lecce on Tuesday, asking for specific steps for schools and child-care centres to operate safely.

Child-care centres “continue to operate without adequate support or resources from your Ministry,” the letter says, in part.

Decent child care is the bedrock of a strong economy. But because its needs have been disregarded by the government, there is a danger that it won’t be there when it is needed most.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: child care workforce ^[4]

COVID-19 ^[5]

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