

Ontario parents paying the price for Ford's solitary stand on childcare costs ^[1]

For Ontario families, this isn't about political gamesmanship, it's about getting a break right now from the highest daycare fees in the country, Fred Youngs writes.

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EXCERPTS

There's a saying that neatly sums up Queen's Park's lonely position on the federal government's plan to dramatically cut daycare costs to parents, across Canada. It is: Never look a gift horse in the mouth.

The gift horse is the Trudeau Liberals, and the billions and billions of dollars that it wants to pour into daycare. The aim is to slash childcare costs across Canada to around \$10 a day — the amount many Quebecers pay. The plan was announced in the spring budget, and repeated over and over and over again during last year's federal election.

Eight months later Ontario is the lone province that hasn't worked out how to close a deal that would save parents thousands of dollars starting this year.

Premier Doug Ford and his education minister, Stephen Lecce, have offered a range of reasons for not signing on, most of which boil down to dollars: Ottawa's offer isn't enough; it doesn't take into account the \$3.6 billion Ontario spends on all-day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds; the deal should extend beyond the five years other provinces accepted; and Ford wants a less restrictive agreement similar to the one signed by Quebec.

But for Ontario parents, this isn't about political gamesmanship. It's about getting a break right now from the highest daycare fees in the country. According to a survey by the left-leaning Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the Canadian cities with the highest child care costs are in Ontario. Hamilton parents pay an average of \$1,497 a month, just behind Mississauga at \$1,591 and Toronto, the highest in Canada at \$1,685.

And the average cost per month for daycare in Montreal? It's \$175 a month. Jealous, anyone?

The same survey estimates that the federal/provincial daycare plan would save Hamilton families \$6,920 this year alone. It tops out at more than \$11,000 a year in savings in 2026.

The political downside to not getting a daycare deal done was not lost on Alberta Premier Jason Kenney, who is no fan of the prime minister. (He once described Justin Trudeau as having "the political depth of a finger bowl.") Still, there they were in November side by side announcing a deal that will save Alberta parents thousands of dollars a year.

Kenney's handling (or mishandling) of the pandemic has driven his polling numbers into the basement, and large factions of his United Conservative Party want a leadership contest. He needs all the help he can get, and cheaper daycare was an offer that was too good to refuse. So good that Kenney reduced fees as of Jan. 1, so Alberta parents are already reaping the benefits.

Parents in Ontario, on the other hand, started the new year deeply angry and frustrated with Ford and Lecce for once again shuttering schools because of the spike in COVID cases. And the fact that Ontario is the only province yet to land a daycare deal that will save them thousands of dollars a year will not be lost on them.

Ottawa doesn't have anything to lose in these negotiations. Ford, on the other hand, has to keep explaining to parents why the rest of the country is already saving money on child care and they aren't. That is a tough sell with a provincial election just five months away.

Which brings to mind another idiom that often gets bandied about: Money talks. And in an election, daycare costs — and when Ontario families will finally catch a break — could talk very loudly.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: parent fees ^[4]

bilateral agreement ^[5]

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