

Ontario should join national child-care plan ^[1]

Ottawa is offering the Ontario government \$10.2 billion over five years ... Ford says that's not enough.

Author: Spectator Editorial

Source: Hamilton Spectator

Format: Article

Publication Date: 10 Jan 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Across Canada, parents are eagerly anticipating 2022 as the year a nationwide, affordable child-care system finally takes shape. But wait. Did we say nationwide? We should have said the long-awaited, much-demanded program will begin ramping up in nine of the country's 10 provinces, in every province except the one with the most working parents and children. And that would be Ontario and its hold-out premier — Doug Ford.

The problem here is neither ideological nor partisan. Premier Ford and his Progressive Conservatives support in principle the federal Liberal government's \$30-billion, five-year child-care plan that promises to cut fees to an average of \$10 a day across the country by 2025 — and trim them in half this year. No, the sticking point on this matter is far more mundane but no less an impediment. We're talking money. Cold, hard cash.

Ottawa is offering the Ontario government \$10.2 billion over five years to kick-start a new child-care program. Ford says that's not enough. Part of his argument is that Ontario spends \$3.6 billion annually on full-day kindergarten, which serves a child-care as well as educational purpose. The premier wants Ottawa to recognize that investment and sweeten its offer by several billion a year for child-care support. Another part of Ford's gripe is that he wants the "same deal" as Quebec is getting. According to Ford, Ontario's eastern neighbour is receiving more per capita for child-care from Ottawa and with fewer federal strings attached.

Not so, says Karina Gould, the federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. She says the federal government "recognizes and appreciates" Ontario's kindergarten regime. She says Ottawa's \$10.2-billion offer is based on Ontario's population. Not only is it fair, she says it remains what the federal government is prepared to give the province.

For many Ontarians, watching this tedious political bickering and inertia is galling. While it's difficult to discern which party deserves the most blame for these stalled daycare negotiations, it's hard to overlook the fact that the federal government has cut child-care deals with every other province and Yukon Territory. Agreements with Nunavut and the Northwest Territories are said to be imminent. If all those other provinces and territories are able to hammer out a deal with Ottawa, why can't Ontario? Perhaps the federal government should offer more support. But the only acceptable response Ford can provide is to get on board this vital program. At this crucial point in history, a truly nationwide child-care program should not stand or fall on the basis of dollars — and which level of government will provide them. We're too close to the finish line.

The demand for affordable, accessible, quality child-care has existed for years. Now, nearly two years of pandemic have shone a spotlight on this need more than ever. Parents working from home — a practice that in many cases will outlast the pandemic — have scrambled to juggle jobs and family responsibilities. Women by far have borne the brunt of these pressures. Then, there's the exorbitant child-care costs that can be crippling for many working families, and have been during the repeated labour disruptions caused by COVID-19. If there was ever a tipping point that moved in favour of a major social program and societal change, this pandemic provided it. In addition there are clearly economic benefits to the country for making it easier for parents — and in particular women — to participate in the workforce.

And so Canada begins 2022 with steady if not entirely certain steps forward in this new initiative. To be sure, the federal Liberals' plan is imperfect and would not, especially in the early years, deliver a system to which everyone has access. But it is a start, a sound start and a firm foundation on which to build. It makes sense on so many levels to have a system that, like public health care, is offered nationwide and that people can rely upon regardless of where they live or choose to move. Signing on to it would be good policy at any time and, in a provincial election year, a smart move for Ford. The premier should do whatever it takes to bring this nationwide program to fruition. We trust his negotiating skills are up to the challenge.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: bilateral agreement ^[4]

\$10aDay ^[5]

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