

# Insiders say Ontario is 'very close' to deal for \$10-a-day child care <sup>[1]</sup>

Ottawa and Queen's Park are "very close" to a deal on \$10-a-day child care, the Star has learned.

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## EXCERPTS

Ottawa and Queen's Park are "very close" to a deal on \$10-a-day child care, the Star has learned.

With Ontario the lone holdout province or territory to sign on to a federal funding plan after Nunavut unveiled its agreement Monday, pressure has been mounting on Premier Doug Ford.

"We're very close. I expect a deal to be finalized shortly," a Ford confidant told the Star hours after the Nunavut accord was made public.

"We are closer than ever before to a national early learning and child-care program," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said as he unveiled a \$66-million deal with Nunavut on Monday.

"This is a game-changer for so many families to see child-care fees cut in half by the end of this year."

Trudeau said fee reductions and rebates announced by provinces are already putting child-care savings in the pockets of families in Nova Scotia, Alberta, Prince Edward Island and Saskatchewan.

For months, Queen's Park and the federal government have debated the broad strokes of a program that would give Ontario \$10.2 billion to expand licensed non-profit child-care spaces, slash average fees in half by the end of this year, and provide \$10-a-day daycare within five years.

"We very much hope that the Ontario government decides that it is in both their interests and mostly the interests of Ontarian families to move forward," he said.

"The federal money is there. We just need the government of Ontario to move forward."

Ontario initially argued its \$3.6 billion spending on junior and senior kindergarten for children ages four and five should be covered, and its for-profit providers should be included — all objections Ottawa has countered or met, and are no longer impediments.

Now the real logjam is over just how long Ottawa would keep up its end of the funding bargain after the five-year deal it is offering expires, federal and provincial sources told the Star.

Federal officials say Ottawa has tried to allay those fears, proposing to either extend the life of the agreement, or to review funding at year three or five to ensure it continues to meet the province's needs.

Ford's government worries that funding for the program would decline, just as federal health transfers have declined from a 50-50 split decades ago to a 22 per cent federal share, leaving the province holding the bag on an expensive social program.

A senior federal official, speaking on background, said no federal government of any political stripe is likely to gut or cancel an established program that helps women enter the workforce and fuels economic growth.

It's clear Ford's Progressive Conservatives don't hold the same ideological objection as the federal Tories, whose leader Erin O'Toole has pledged to scrap the \$30-billion program altogether.

In its place, O'Toole has proposed to give families up to \$6,000 a year via a refundable tax credit instead of expanding regulated non-profit child-care spaces.

But Ford's government wants to take advantage of the federal program offer, and is working through details in talks between officials that were expected to run throughout the week.

"We've been working very hard to get a fair deal for Ontario families because we know child care is too expensive," said Education Minister Stephen Lecce.

“It is inaccessible to too many families in Ontario. That just simply is unacceptable.”

Lecce noted talks are progressing toward an accord that “is fiscally sustainable, that actually gets prices down to \$10 a day, that ensures women can get back to the labour market and support our economic recovery.

“They continue this week — as they have over the past weeks — with the single aim of a fair deal for Ontario families that reduces costs and increases access to spaces in all communities of the province.”

A senior provincial government official emphasized there is “continued optimism” a deal can be struck with Ottawa.

“The meetings have been constructive,” said the high-ranking insider, speaking confidentially in order to discuss internal deliberations.

“If this lowers the cost of daycare for families, it’s the right thing to do,” said the official, emphasizing Ontario’s regulated hybrid of public and private child care is “complex” so negotiations are painstaking.

“Both sides want to get it right. Both sides are looking very carefully at what the elements of a deal would look like. It’s a long-term, major new social program so the parameters have to be in place to ensure it is sustainable,” added the insider.

“We’re optimistic we’re on a good path with the federal government.”

With an Ontario election set for June 2, the opposition parties want the Progressive Conservatives to strike a deal soon.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath and NDP MPP Bhutika Karpoche (Parkdale-High Park) urged the Tories to move.

“Ford should have relieved the sting of high child-care prices months ago, saving families thousands this winter,” the New Democrats said in a joint statement.

“Families in Ontario continue to be crushed by Ontario’s massive child-care fees,” they said. “Doug Ford’s refusal to make parents and young families a priority means that parents are paying \$2,000 a month or more in fees while families in every other jurisdiction in the country are paying as low as \$10-a-day.”

Liberal Leader Steven Del Duca has warned that the Tories’ inability to achieve an agreement like every other province and territory will be an issue in the upcoming Ontario election.

Green Leader Mike Schreiner said “Ford continues to fail Ontario families on affordability.”

“Ten-dollar-a-day child care is there for the taking, but the Ford government is dragging its heels,” said Schreiner.

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** universal system <sup>[4]</sup>

agreements <sup>[5]</sup>

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