

# No good reason for Ontario to delay signing child-care agreement <sup>[1]</sup>

A small minority of critics are trying to weaken the pan-Canadian response, ignoring research that shows quality will improve with this new policy.

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

Excerpted from article:

All Ontarians – not just parents of young children – should welcome Ottawa’s national child-care policy and urge the province to sign on. Ontario is the last holdout on the national initiative. While Premier Doug Ford dithers, a small minority is trying to weaken the pan-Canadian policy. They are trying to undermine the national approach, for reasons that include skepticism, financial self-interest and old-fashioned nostalgia for the 1950s family. While they may have the Ford government’s ear, they should not.

Ford has argued for extra concessions to Ontario under the federal plan – more federal funds beyond the \$10 billion already promised (he says this is to recognize that Ontario has full-day kindergarten for children under five), a commitment for funding beyond five years (the term in all the other deals), and a “no-strings” transfer of the funds, similar to the deal that Quebec signed.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce, who leads Ontario’s negotiating team, has gone further, repeatedly saying Ontario wants any deal to let parents choose any kind of child care, be it for-profit, not-for-profit, or unregulated.

While elected Conservative officials raise objections, there are also voices outside government trying to water down the potential deal. Some critics of the federal plan argue the focus on licensed and regulated child care is flawed. They further claim that excluding unlicensed babysitting restricts parent choices. They call for funding to go directly to parents, with no requirement that tax dollars be allocated to regulated care that meets minimum public standards.

Let’s be clear. Parent vouchers and their equivalent do nothing to expand access, promote affordability or fairly compensate educators. Evidence shows that supply-side funding is the best way to build stable early-learning and care services. What’s more, the “paperwork burdens and red tape” that raise the ire of some critics are really regulations to protect the health and safety of children – an objective that should not be up for debate.

Some base their opposition to the federal plan on the grounds that it would not serve a majority of Ontario’s children. Quite to the contrary: low access to licensed services in Ontario should be a motivator to act, not a hindrance.

Currently, licensed child-care services in Ontario can serve fewer than one in four children. Ontario’s situation is not unique, and that’s why agreements in every other province and territory make rapid expansion a priority. Historically, child care has long been underfunded, and expansion will take time, even if it begins immediately. Ottawa’s plan may be the only way to achieve high-quality, affordable, flexible and inclusive early learning and child care for all families, no matter where they live.

Some lobbyists want to reverse Ottawa’s emphasis on not-for-profit child-care services. About 20 per cent of Ontario’s child-care centres are run as a commercial business. Ottawa’s insistence on building up non-profit services is for a good reason: evidence shows a clear pattern of better quality in the non-profit sector.

Commercial operators in Ontario, though, are part of an industry association which also includes non-profits. They are demanding they be eligible for provincial funding and parent-fee relief to create what they call a level playing field. They insist that they are “following the same rules” and thus any different funding is unwarranted, overlooking the fact that non-profits and charities are subject to different rules around the distribution of assets upon closing. A more discerning analysis is that commercial operators are eager to receive public dollars for their private businesses.

One of the more opportunistic claims is that female entrepreneurs might lose their business if funding is restricted to licensed non-profit programs. It’s true that women provide nearly all home-based babysitting. Whether Ontario signs a child-care agreement or not, providers caring for four or fewer children can continue to operate and independently set the fees they charge parents.

However, it is likely that many parents currently using an unlicensed babysitter will choose to move their children to licensed care as it becomes more widely available and more affordable. As a result, we can predict the supply of unregulated caregiving will shrink. Either

way, unregulated babysitting is no more appropriately eligible for public funding than any other unregulated home-based business.

Finally, many of these minority voices challenge the very vision of universal child care. They betray a barely veiled longing for a mythical time when child-care services were unnecessary because mothers were full-time homemakers. Since the 1970s, the majority of mothers have held paid jobs. Even in the 1950s and early 1960s, about one in five Canadian mothers had a paid job. Today, more than three-quarters of Ontario mothers are in the labour market, along with even higher rates of fathers – longstanding trends with no sign of reversing.

Under Ottawa’s multilateral framework agreement, more than \$30 billion is available for provinces and territories which accept its vision of high-quality, regulated, primarily non-profit early learning and child-care services, provided by well-educated and fairly remunerated educators. There is no reason to cave to those who seek to weaken child-care policy. For more than 838,000 children five and under years – and for everyone who relies on someone who relies on child care – a solid Ontario child-care agreement can’t come soon enough.

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

**Tags:** federal agreement <sup>[4]</sup>

\$10 a day <sup>[5]</sup>

child care crisis <sup>[6]</sup>

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