

'Historic moment' – DSSAB, others applaud child-care deal ^[1]

Ontario parents get rebates in May amid the provincial election campaign

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EXCERPTS

Last but not least.

The Government of Canada and Ontario have signed a \$13.2-billion, six-year child-care agreement, ultimately establishing a first-ever national child-care program designed to help parents of young children.

The agreement means that Ontario has extended the anticipated five-year \$10.2 billion offer for an extra year, with at least additional funding of \$2.9 billions committed, to reduce the concern of the provincial government that the province would be left on the hook for child-care agreements after the initial five years.

The agreement includes built-in protections, which will be automatically reviewed after year three, said Ontario Premier Doug Ford during the announcement.

"This is a historic moment," said Mike Nadeau, CEO of the Sault Ste. Marie District Social Services Administration Board. "A national child-care program has been talked about for many years and I'm excited to work with the province and with parents to implement this endeavour."

"This is such a great day for Ontario, such a great day for Canada," said Deputy PM and Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland. "This is truly a good day."

High quality \$10-per-day day care will mean women won't have to choose between their careers and families and comes at a time when Canada needs it most with its current labour shortages and affordability challenges, she said.

It's anticipated the agreement will see parents see an immediate reduction of child-care fees by about 25 per cent on average April 1 (to be applied retroactively), for children under the age of six, and a further 25 per cent by December.

The actual \$10-per-day average cost won't be seen until September 2025.

"That's significant relief for parents who have children enrolled in our licenced day-care program," Nadeau said.

Currently, the DSSAB's child-care rates are based on age and location of services. On average, infants pay \$46.88 per day, toddlers \$41.75 and preschoolers \$39.61.

The DSSAB currently operates 1,494 day-care spaces. It has an additional waiting list of 1,490 children.

"Our waiting list is significant and we're hoping that's one of the issues that will be addressed in the coming weeks as we get more details about the agreement," he said.

Ontario has also received assurances the federal government will unveil a large infrastructure program, which will create 86,000 additional child-care spaces across the province and ensure that the program will be self-sustaining after the initial program. Benchmarks have been created that will see the full number of spaces created gradually over a five-year timeline.

Nadeau said there are no details on what that will mean to Sault Ste. Marie, but he said it is one step that is needed to raise the bar for day care.

Early childhood educator talent and increasing the labour supply is also required. Wages, to be set at a minimum of \$18 per hour and \$25 per hour for supervisors, "is a start," Nadeau said, to encourage more individuals to pursue an ECE career, but is something he wants to see increased further and be competitive with wages of those working for school boards.

Nadeau said a lack of affordable child care has been a barrier to single parents and he's hopeful this will offer some relief.

Sault Ste. Marie Chamber of Commerce CEO Rory Ring said the business community is supportive of the move toward more affordable day care.

Labour shortages are hitting critical stages in several sectors and it is important to ensure that families with young children can become engaged – or return – to the workforce.

“We saw that some people, especially women, left the workforce during the pandemic and their families because the top priority. But with many of them making minimum wage or about \$20 per hour, there is a balancing act they have to consider and that includes whether it’s worth paying up to \$1,800 a month for day care with their take-home pay,” he said. “Some families will find that the greater importance is to look after their children and suffer a little economic burden.”

The chamber is hopeful that a national day-care program will reverse that trend and encourage women – and other stay-at-home parents – to return to the workforce.

“We see shortages in the hospitality and food and accommodation sectors and front lines where women have traditionally filled this role,” he said. “Hopefully we’ll see some beneficial outcomes from this.”

There are also provisions expected for private sector day-care operators, or for-profit operations.

Nadeau said while details have not yet been released, there are indications that private child-care systems will be protected.

“We’re not sure how the funding formula will roll out or be implemented. That’s something we’ll learn more about in the weeks to come,” he said.

Now that the federal and provincial governments have an agreement, the Ontario government will work to develop agreements with each of the province’s DSSABs, where more of the details will come.

The announcement was good news for the Sault Ste. Marie YMCA.

“This is a historic moment for children and families in Sault Ste. Marie and across Ontario. Thanks to this agreement child care will be more affordable and more accessible to working families,” said Robert Burns, CEO of the Sault YMCA. “The federal-provincial child-care agreement will benefit our children and community for generations to come. We are optimistic that it also allows ECEs to be recognized as the essential workers that they have proven to be, especially during the past two years.”

Burns agreed a well-trained and well-compensated child care workforce will be critical to the plan.

Access to licensed, high-quality child care gives parents, and women in particular, a choice to enter or return to the workforce knowing that their children will be in enriching, nurturing and safe child-care environments. High-quality child care programs contribute to healthy early childhood development while improving school readiness and lifelong employment outcomes, Burns said in a press release.

Ontario is the last province to agree to the terms of the deal. The federal government has signed agreements with each province and territory.

Meanwhile, Ontario Liberal leader Steven Del Duca congratulated the Trudeau government for establishing the plan, but said he was disappointed Ford waited so long to sign onto the plan, arguing that young families could have had assistance earlier.

He said if the Liberals are elected in June, the party will make the payments retroactive to Jan. 1, an average of \$2,750 per child, and is the only party pledging \$10 per day for before and after school care by this September.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath called the agreement welcome news, but notes the province held out for an additional nine months without getting a better deal.

Parents, she said “would have about \$2,300 more in their bank account right now if it weren’t for Ford’s bad choices,” she said.

Horwath said if she is elected premier in June, she commits to work with the Trudeau government to get child care down to \$10 per day as soon as possible, expand the number of child care spaces in Ontario and increase wages for child-care providers.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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