Child care affordability leads to questions of space creation in Ontario election [1]

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EXCERPTS

TORONTO - When Camille Mauger went back to work in March of 2019, a little over a year after giving birth to her son, she was on about seven to 10 child-care wait lists and had not heard back from any of them.

She had started her search when her son was three months old and acknowledges she should have started her search sooner — many parents in high-demand areas of the province get on lists very early in pregnancy — but it was moot, because the fees were too high anyway.

“It became very evident to us that the cost of daycare in Ontario, and in Toronto especially, was high enough that we would (have to) consider to continue providing care for our child on our own as it was quickly realized that the cost was roughly equivalent to one parent’s salary,” Mauger said.

Mauger’s husband cared full-time for their son while she went back to work. The pair started considering daycare again in early 2021 and managed to secure a spot at a centre in Toronto, a spot Mauger believes would not have been readily available were it not for the pandemic.

Affordability issues such as housing and gas prices are central in the Ontario election campaign, and for many parents of young children there is no bigger expense than child care, which often represents a higher monthly cost than mortgage payments.

Average fees in Ontario are currently about $73 a day for infants, $61 for toddlers, and $53 for preschoolers, according to the recently struck deal between Ontario and the federal government to lower fees to an average of $10 a day by 2025.

“Our reaction was one of just tremendous joy and sort of feeling like, finally this deal is going through and it’s at least a step in the right direction,” Mauger said.

Ontario reached an agreement with the federal government in March, making it the last province to do so. Rebates haven’t yet landed, but operators have until Sept. 1 to decide if they want to enroll in the program. If they do, parents will see their fees reduced by an initial average of 25 per cent and rebated to April 1.

Liberal Leader Steven Del Duca has promised to make the discounts retroactive to Jan. 1 to account for what he calls Doug Ford’s delays in signing the deal. (The province said it negotiated as long as it did in order to get the best possible deal.)

But Adrienne Davidson, an assistant professor of political science at McMaster University with expertise in child-care policy, said that with fewer than half of children aged two to four in Ontario in licensed care, creating new spaces is going to be the biggest lingering concern.

“I think most people will just be happy that there’s a deal,but that doesn’t necessarily negate it as an election issue,” she said.

“That’s a lot of kids out of licensed care and a lot of families that don’t have access to licensed care, and you have to have a kid in licensed care in order to see benefits as well, and so I think the access piece is one piece that could potentially see greater politicization.”

The Ontario child-care deal came with a promise to create 86,000 spaces by the end of 2026, though it includes 15,000 that have already been created since 2019. But advocates say that won’t be enough to meet the demand that will come with cheaper fees.

Gordon Cleveland, a child-care policy expert and associate professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, said he expects the province will need an additional 200,000 spaces by the end of this year.

When the deal was reached, the Progressive Conservatives said Ontario is factoring in some increased demand to their plan and will review progress partway through the agreement. As well, municipalities will have to submit plans for spaces so the province can allocate them to a “broad range of communities.“

The NDP has promised to ensure any government-funded expansion of child-care spaces is exclusively for public or not-for-profit centres. The current agreement says Ontario will maintain the existing proportion of not-for-profit spaces at 70 per cent or higher.

The overall proportion of for-profit child-care spaces for kids aged zero to five is 30 per cent, but it varies across regions, with some faster-growing regions seeing up to 44 per cent of spaces in for-profit centres, according to figures contained in the federal agreement.

As of February, about 66 per cent of the applications being processed by the Ministry of Education for new, centre-based spaces for kids aged zero to five are from for-profit operators.

The NDP and the Liberals both promise to enhance wages for early childhood educators. Advocates say many have left the child-care sector to work in schools, such as in full-day kindergarten classrooms, where the pay is much higher.

Part of the child-care deal includes setting a minimum wage for registered early childhood educators at $18 an hour, rising by $1 each year until it hits $25. The NDP has promised an immediate increase to $25 for registered ECEs and $20 for all other program staff. The Liberals have also pledged to boost child-care worker pay, and also provide free tuition for ECE college programs.

Carolyn Ferns, public policy and government relations coordinatorfor the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, said space creation simply will not happen without higher wages for staff.

“Until we solve that problem, good luck creating 86,000 new spaces for families, because it’s not going to happen until unless you deal with the workforce crisis,” she said.

Ferns herself knows that scramble to find a space.

When she was pregnant with her now-four-year-old son, she was on 12 waiting lists.

“I just drew a circle around my apartment and everything here, like get on every list, and just hope that you’ve got something by the time you’ve got to go back to work,” she said.

Ferns believes she only landed a spot because she knows the sector and told every operator that she could fill any last-minute vacancies they had.

“I knew to say to every child-care centre, ‘I know how it is for you. If a space comes open and you need to fill it on Monday, I’ll take it, even if it means that I have to go back to work before my mat leave is over, I’ll just do that,’” she said. “And that’s what happened.”

Davidson, the professor, also has personal experience with the struggle of finding child care for her daughter, now four years old. She, like many parents, went on a large number of wait lists and took the only spot that was offered in time.

“We talk a lot about choice in child care and a lot of the rhetoric in…the politics of childcare is around choice,” she said.

“Parents often don’t have choice in child care. You sign up for how many wait lists and you take whatever you get.”
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