

Daycare operators wary about opting-in to \$10/day child-care program ^[1]

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Source: CityNews

Format: Article

Publication Date: 9 Jun 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPT

As parents anxiously wait to reap the benefits of Ontario's deal with the federal government to introduce \$10-a-day child care, what they might not know is the program is not mandatory.

Amy O'Neil, who runs the Treetop Children's Centre in Toronto, tells CityNews many operators are unsure if they will opt-in to the program.

"We cannot make a decision based on the current information that we have because we don't know what that will mean for the quality of care. We don't know what it means for the work force in terms of wages," says O'Neil.

Childcare operators received a 74-page document from the Ministry of Education back in April, outlining the funding rules, which many say is full of confusing language, lots of grey areas and leaves more questions than answers.

Jennifer Brown, owner of La Petite École in Bloor West Village, says the province appears to be proposing a no-frills model that may not be financially viable for many of the private operators.

"We have expenses that other centres may not be subjected to," says Brown.

While reasonable rents will be covered, Brown explains things like mortgages, debt interest and property taxes are explicitly left out of the funding.

Quality of care is another concern. There is little information on what base fees will cover and many operators offer enriched programming, which parent fees currently help pay for.

Brown says she offers French as a second language and has specially trained educators. She also notes Montessori-specific materials are left out of the addendum.

Kidz Kove is an independent daycare centre in Peel Region and owner Sharon Siribo worries the provincial model will create a two-tiered system.

"A divide will be felt in lower-income communities and you will be waitlisted," says Siribo. "There will be spaces that will not be available to families if this is not revised."

The Ministry of Education tells CityNews the "program details have been communicated to operators for many weeks. The province has released funding allocations to municipalities and is strongly encouraging municipal partners to work as quickly as possible with child-care operators to get this money into parents' pockets. Operators need to apply to the program and the money will flow from municipalities."

Many parents are feeling betrayed by the promise of \$10-a-day childcare.

Robyn Vanpee's three-year-old daughter attends an east-end Toronto daycare. She understands why the operator may opt out of the program but adds if that's the case, they have no choice but to keep paying full price.

"There are no spots anywhere. We were on a waitlist for two years and there are no spots private or otherwise right now," she tells CityNews.

Her husband, Mark, says what's unfolding right now is not fair.

"When I'm paying \$1,600 a month and someone else is paying \$300, that's not equitable," he says.

The City of Toronto tells CityNews there are more than 1,000 child-care centres and licensed home child-care agencies that are eligible to apply to the program. They have until Sept. 1 to opt-in.

City officials also say more details will be shared this month, including targeted information sessions for licensed child care operators and a

town hall on June 22.

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