

# For parents, big child-care savings. For caregivers, 'a leap of faith'

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Kimberly Mitchell knows how anxious parents of young children are to start receiving the promised savings on their child care costs.

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## EXCERPTS

Kimberly Mitchell knows how anxious parents of young children are to start receiving the promised savings on their child care costs.

"We are absolutely thrilled and excited for the opportunity for our families to be able to get access to affordable child care," said the executive director of Western Day Care Centre, one of dozens of licensed child-care centres across London and Middlesex County about the Canada-wide early-learning plan.

Child care providers are anxious too, but for different reasons. Affordable child care isn't just a case of lowering fees and cutting cheques to families.

Politicians made it sound easy at the end of March when Ontario, the last province to join the plan, signed a \$10.2-billion deal with the federal government promising an average of \$10-a-day care for children ages five and younger once the program is phased in.

But the program is poised to change fundamentally how child care centres provide their services. What's worrying Mitchell and other child care centre operators is how they're going to put into action the first steps by Sept. 1, just six weeks away, when they must declare whether they will opt in.

Operators, she said, are being asked to take "a leap of faith" rather than baby steps. "How many other professions are asked to sign without full knowledge of what the implications are going to be, because they haven't been made yet?" she said.

"We're going have to make some very major decisions in a very quick time," she said.

Next week, licensed child care providers, both big and small, will be meeting with London city hall officials to get a better understanding of what's expected of them before they decide whether to opt in.

"It is my sincere hope there is strong uptake from operators," said Trevor Fowler, London city hall's director of child care and early years who is administering the funding for local centres.

There are 60 child care centres and 75 home-based businesses in London and Middlesex. Fowler said there are 14,000 to 15,000 child care spaces, however the total includes before- and after-school programs with children who have aged out of the national child care funding program.

Families are supposed to see reduced fees once the child-care centres opt in. A 25 per cent reduction kicked in on April 1 when the province signed on, with the promise that families will receive rebates in September before going forward at the reduced rate.

Another 25 per cent reduction is planned to kick in by the end of 2022, with incremental decreases in store as the program moves forward into 2025 and 2026.

The anticipated savings are dramatic. Fowler said the average cost of infant care is currently \$60 a day, but it will be halved by early next year.

"We are hopeful this will help families afford licensed child care because we know what high-quality child care does for families, both from the perspective of what the child receives in terms of early education but also the family's ability to participate in the economy," Fowler said.

Child care centre operators agree, but fear they're running out of time to assess the guidelines and make decisions. However, not opting in might force their clients to seek cheaper care from providers in the program.

"Certainly, we still have a few questions. It is fully our intention to opt in, but we do have a few reservations," Mitchell said.

At the top of the list for Mitchell is the early childhood educator staffing crisis and pay grade she fears might get lost in the shuffle.

The plan promises to increase the wages of all child-care workers to at least \$18 an hour, and an increase of \$1 an hour next year. Mitchell said her hope was the pay scale would have started at \$25 and “that our educators get recognized for the important work that they do.”

She wonders how both the federal and provincial governments can promise more child care spaces when there aren’t enough early childhood educators to fill current needs. She had to close one room at one of Western’s two centres because she can’t find enough qualified staff.

Nicole Blanchette, executive director of La Ribambelle, a French-language child care provider with nine centres in London and Sarnia, said she also is concerned about the pay grade for educators.

She added that every child care centre has unique issues based on their size and the families they serve. She has questions as well about how the guidelines will factor in all costs, such as staffing, administration, leases, mortgages and every other cost that comes with running a non-profit child care centre.

“There’s still information (to know) like how much freedom we will have to manage ourselves like we have been doing for the past 35 years,” she said.

Also, the timing is difficult because during the summer months, most organizations don’t meet with their boards of directors. “It’s not that it’s not feasible, it’s the rush,” she said. “Can we really figure out how we are going to do all that?”

“Trust me, we all want to see fees lowered for parents. It’s more about what does it entail? How much time do we have to look at it all and figure things out and even figure out how we are going to manage this?” Blanchette said.

Both Mitchell and Blanchette emphasized they’ve had excellent support from city hall staff as they navigate the complexities of the guidelines and are confident they will be advocates going forward. “It’s the timeline and the complexity of managing all that and what it means and what it entails that is creating anxiety,” Blanchette said.

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

**Tags:** child care <sup>[4]</sup>

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

Canada-wide agreement <sup>[6]</sup>

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