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Sudbury parents seeing day care relief as city opts for provincial plan early [1]

Child care operators have until Sept. 1, to opt-in to plan.
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EXCERPTS

There are still a few more weeks left before daycare operators have to decide if they want to opt in to Ontario's new $10 a day child care program, but hundreds of families in Sudbury have already been saving on fees.

In March, Ontario signed on to the federal government's national child care plan, the last province to do so. By April, parents with children at the Walden Day Care already had their fees cut by 25 per cent.

The deal commits the federal government to providing $10.2 billion to Ontario over a five-year period to bring the average cost of a child-care spot down to $10 per day in 2025, according to federal and provincial officials.

The agreement also includes a plan to create 86,000 new child care spaces in Ontario by 2026, with the priority on not-for-profit operators.

Mary-Lou Coffey, executive director of Walden Day Care, said her facility opted into the program early on.

"We just felt it would be easier if we got on board right at the beginning," Coffey said. "And that it would be easier and of more benefit for parents to get access to that 25 per cent right off the get-go rather than waiting for three or four or five months."

Coffey said they weren't keen on jumping blindly into the provincial program before they had all the pertinent details, but she added the opportunity for parents was too good to pass up.

"We've been fighting for affordable child care for years and years," Coffey said. "Yes, we didn't have all the answers, but it was definitely the time to embrace this. And let's get going."

Once a daycare operator becomes part of the program, it can offer families a 25 per cent reduction in child care fees. That moves to 50 per cent next year, and costs then fall to $10 a day by 2025.

But the challenge, Coffey said, is going to be twofold – keeping enough staff on hand, and accommodating a growing wait list.

"We're at, depending on the age group, quite literally hundreds on the wait list," Coffey said. "So parents are seeing this [program] as a good thing. It's obviously going to make quality child care more affordable. And parents see that."

Staffing, Coffey said, will also present some challenges.

"It's not only bringing in new, but it's also going to be retaining whom we do have," she said. "And it's no big secret that child care is not a high paying industry, let's put it that way."

"That's going to have to be dealt with to appeal to other people. But I do think we're making progress in all of these areas slowly," she said. "And if we want to speed up the system to get more people, more licensed capacity, more families in it, then we're going to have to speed up the system."

Tracy Saarikoski, executive director of the Discovery Early Learning & Care in Sudbury, said the next step for the province will be to address issues in the labour market.

"We know that we can't provide a high quality program without a huge investment in our workforce," Saarikoski said in an email to CBC News. "This will be the next necessary step to support programs in the recruitment and retention of early learning and care professionals (registered early childhood educators) and support staff."

"An additional piece will be the investment of spaces and capital funds to create new spaces for families. All of this has be happen at the same time and not in steps."

Day care fees a 'second mortgage', advocate says

Carolyn Ferns, with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, a group that represents more than 400 not-for-profit day cares, said child care fees have been like a "second mortgage" for some families.

"Just to put things in proportion, parents in Ontario pay the highest child care fees in the country, often more than $1,000, sometimes $2,000 a month for childcare," Ferns said.

"For families, this is coming at just the right time when we have an inflation crisis and an affordability crisis," Ferns said. "To finally get some relief of parent fees is going to be such a big difference."

Ferns said that daycare operators, too, are enthusiastic about the program rollout.

"They want to opt in and get lower fees for families and stable funding for the sector," she said. "There has been less enthusiasm around opting in from the for-profit childcare centre businesses, which are about 25 per cent of the spaces in Ontario."

"They've sort of expressed concern about opting in because it might limit the profits that they can make," Ferns said. "So I think maybe fewer of those centres are going to opt in."

Laura Urso, with the City of Greater Sudbury's Children Services Program Coordinator, said of the 18 child care operators in Greater Sudbury, 11 have so far opted-in to the program.

"We are expecting that all or most of them will opt in," Urso said. "They are still working with their boards of directors to make sure that they've thought of all of the angles of how to implement the program."

"This is a pretty big change, but it's one that we've been advocating for."

Day cares have until September 1st to decide whether or not to opt in to the program.

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