

Ontario should live up to child care deal ^[1]

The federal government must make clear that Ontario must live up to the child care deal it signed, in both detail and spirit.

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Excerpts

Few Ontarians can feel as appallingly misled by Premier Doug Ford's "Get it Done" campaign slogan than those banking on the promised \$10-a-day national child care plan.

Far from demonstrating alacrity in joining a laudable federal initiative, the Ford government was the last jurisdiction in Canada to reach agreement with Ottawa on its \$30-billion program.

The suspicion was that Ford delayed the move for political purposes in order to have a handy springboard with which to enter the 2022 election campaign.

With a report Sunday by the Star's Rachel Mendleson and Brendan Kennedy, there's good reason for concern about the province's commitment to the program's ideals.

The report said that after hiring a public relations firm, launching a website and encouraging parents to inundate government members with emails, a group of for-profit daycare owners met with Education Minister Stephen Lecce in August and received a sympathetic hearing for their argument that the \$10-a-day child care plan would put them out of business.

"When we left the meeting, we genuinely felt that we would see changes coming" to the program for which Lecce is responsible in Ontario, a participant said.

And within months of pledging to partner with the federal government, the province was already stripping a series of checks on funding rules that guarded against "undue profits" and "ineligible expenditures" by operators.

Those changes threaten to compromise a program designed to transform the current market-based system plagued with soaring fees, long wait lists and uneven quality.

The Ford government's machinations were enough to prompt a letter of concern from Karina Gould, the federal minister of families, children and social development, who oversees the national child care plan.

The usual squabble ensued, with Ottawa suggesting Ontario's changes to the plan might not fulfil its promise to implement stringent cost controls. Lecce's office insists "the core element of the cost control framework remains in place."

The comments emanating in recent weeks from Health Minister Sylvia Jones, moreover, suggest an unsettling receptivity to privatization in that sector.

It's dismaying to see the province already playing fast and loose with commitments made just months ago.

It's equally disturbing to see how suggestible Ford and his ministers are when private operators get them behind closed doors.

"Having the ear of the present government can make significant change of policy in a very short period of time," Sheila Olan-MacLean, CEO of a non-profit provider in Peterborough and a member of Lecce's advisory group, told the Star.

The government changes to the funding guidelines "felt like a punch to the gut," she said.

The province must ditch its penchant for secrecy and ensure that development of such a critical piece of social infrastructure is conducted in as transparent and accountable a manner as possible.

The federal government, meanwhile, must make clear that Ontario must live up to the deal it signed, in both detail and spirit.

"If Ottawa backs down this early, we will see public funding flow to the profits of private operators instead of creating good childcare for kids," said Kerry McCuaig, a fellow in early child policy at the University of Toronto's Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development.

The premier should make it clear where his priority lies.

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