

Middle class to get daycare help [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario parents with incomes less than \$75,000 a year will be eligible for child-care subsidies, once the preserve of poor families under a new early learning and care program unveiled yesterday.

In a huge departure from the past decade, when the province cut subsidies and invested in all other children's services but child care, Ontario announced the first step of an ambitious plan, loosely modelled on Quebec's, to provide a care space to every preschooler and partial or full subsidies to the vast majority.

Ontario will charge fees on a sliding scale based on incomes, a far cry from Quebec's heavily subsidized \$7-a-day system. Child care will be free for families with incomes less than \$25,000 a year, and fees will rise with incomes. Parents earning more than \$75,000 a year will pay full fees.

And unlike Quebec's \$1.4-billion child-care system, which took only a few years to include all preschool-age children, the Ontario version will take a decade or more to do so.

"We did consider the Quebec model," said Marie Bountrogianni, Ontario Minister of Children and Youth Services, who unveiled the government's plan at a children and youth summit in Toronto yesterday.

"When they instituted \$7-a-day daycare, quite often resourceful, wealthy families went to the front of the line and unresourceful families are still on waiting lists."

The ultimate vision is a system with schools as hubs for kindergarten, subsidized child care, free half-day preschool for children 2½ to almost 4, parenting centres and public-health programs. It will start next fall with a full-day program of kindergarten and child care in schools for four and five-year-olds.

"It will be tens of thousands of new spaces," Dr. Bountrogianni said. She said that about 100,000 more children -- or 50,000 more spaces, because children in junior and senior kindergarten will attend child care for a half day -- will be in child care by the end of the government's mandate.

The parents of 9 per cent of children in child care now collect subsidies. The government intends that 75 per cent of children in the combined kindergarten and child-care program be subsidized.

As of last February, there were 185,448 licensed child-care spaces in Ontario.

Ontario's plan depends on the \$400-million it expects to collect from the federal government in the new few months, the first instalment of \$5-billion promised over the next five years for the province to create a national system of early learning and care.

Dr. Bountrogianni said that she would be demanding more money from Ottawa when she returns in January to sit down with other provincial social service ministers and federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden to draft a blueprint for the early-education system.

While far less generous than Quebec's flat-fee system, the sliding-scale subsidy will replace a system in which only the poorest families are eligible and middle-class families struggle to pay child-care fees of \$40 a day or more.

Starting next week, the government will also scrap the rule that disqualified parents with money stashed in registered retirement savings plans and registered education savings plans from collecting child-care subsidies, regardless of how low their incomes are.

- reprinted from Globe and Mail

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