

Ontario's Tories say no plan to slash child care as indicated in leaked report [CA-ON] ^[1]

Author: Szklarski, Cassandra

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EXCERPTS:

TORONTO (CP) - Ontario's Conservative government is not planning to slash its \$470-million child-care budget by almost half as indicated in a leaked report, the province's social services minister insisted Thursday.

John Baird said a draft report suggesting \$200 million in cuts won't be implemented, as child-care workers and advocates have accused the government of planning to gut the cash-strapped service and close child-care centres across the province.

"The Ontario government is not considering any plan to cut \$200 million from child care. Period," Baird said in a release.

"I don't know how I can make it any clearer than that." The draft discussion paper, dated October 2001 and leaked in November, outlines policy options for the future of regulated child care if \$200 million were chopped from the budget.

The suggestion horrified child-care workers and advocates, who said Thursday that the overstressed child-care system cannot afford to lose one cent from its budget.

"It will decimate a system that we have been working on since the 1940s," said Mary Anne Bedard of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

Bedard said the proposal would eliminate wage grants for child-care workers, subsidies for working parents and force the closure of child-care centres.

"It's disgraceful. . . . They are going in the wrong direction and they're moving fast toward irreparable damage."

When the document was leaked last fall, Baird said the proposal was a preliminary draft on the creation of a provincial child benefit and wasn't something being seriously considered.

But he has not guaranteed that the province's current level of funding is secure.

"He can't tell you that funding is going to go up, he can't tell you that funding is going to go down," said Baird spokesman Ben Hamilton.

Bedard and New Democrat social affairs critic Shelley Martel said they won't be satisfied until Baird says there will be no cuts whatsoever.

"How can he make this clearer?" Martel said.

"He can say clearly and emphatically as I urged him to do today that this government will continue to spend \$471 million on regulated child care today, tomorrow, next week into the next fiscal year and that not a single cent won't be cut."

Ontario's child-care system provides 167,000 licensed day-care spots in regulated centres and homes.

Under the current \$471-million system, almost \$300 million is spent on fee subsidies that help an estimated 70,000 families pay for regulated child care.

Another \$116 million subsidizes the wages of some 20,000 day-care workers across the province. The remaining money helps fund child-care resource centres and programs for disabled children.

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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funding ^[4]

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