

Ontario child care facing uncertain future ^[1]

Day Two in the Toronto Star's series "The Child Care Challenge", Part 1

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EXCERPTS

Carrie Brown has seen more than a generation of midtown Toronto children move through teething, toddling and the transition to kindergarten.

But after 30 years as the supervisor at St. Michael and All Angels Day Care, Brown wonders if the bustling child-care centre near Bathurst and St. Clair Ave. W. will still be open in four years.

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All-day kindergarten began in almost 600 schools across the province last fall and extends to another 200 schools in September. It will be available next fall in one of three schools that serve 4- and 5-year-olds who now spend half the day in Brown's centre.

It is too early to say how the daycare will be affected or how many of the centre's 20 kindergarten-age children will leave, Brown said.

"By the look of it, we'll definitely be laying off staff at some point," she sighed.

Child-care fees for 4- and 5-year-olds help keep fees down for the younger children who are more costly to serve. With kindergarten-age children leaving daycares, fees will skyrocket for the remaining babies, toddlers and preschoolers. And without new government funding, many daycares, like Brown's, will collapse.

By next fall, 20 per cent of Toronto's 650 city-funded child-care centres will be affected by the loss of kindergarten-age children, city officials say.

This is on top of chronic provincial underfunding that has caused a widespread shortage of subsidies for low- and moderate-income parents, kept wages low and sent parent fees soaring to between \$10,000 and \$15,000 a year.

Parents, educators and children's advocates praise Premier Dalton McGuinty's plan to phase in all-day kindergarten and after-school programs by 2015. And they welcome the premier's promise to reinvest the daycare money from 4- and 5-year-olds into care for younger children.

But they say the reinvestment isn't happening fast enough.

"Child-care programs across the province are in crisis," said Andrea Calver of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

"Premier McGuinty said he would free up spaces in child care and actually make it more affordable," she said. "But subsidy waiting lists are growing and centres say they are losing spaces and may be forced to close."

The coalition is calling on the province to earmark at least \$100 million in the spring budget and commit another \$200 million next year to stabilize the system.

The money would be used to limit parent fee increases due to the loss of 4- and 5-year-olds. And it would raise daycare worker salaries, to help keep staff from fleeing to better-paying jobs in all-day kindergarten programs where teachers team up with early childhood educators in the classroom.

Education Minister Leona Dombrowsky says the province is addressing child-care needs by phasing in all-day kindergarten gradually over five years.

It kicked in \$63.5 million last year to save 8,500 subsidized spaces that were at risk due to lost federal funding under the Harper government.

The province invested another \$51 million for new subsidies and \$12 million in capital funding over five years to help daycares renovate

to serve younger children.

"What I can say to the parents is that we have made some unprecedented investments for them and for our children," Dombrowsky said in an interview.

Ontario has budgeted \$500 million for the first two phases of all-day kindergarten, an amount that will grow to \$1.5 billion by 2015, when the program is offered in every school.

Child-care funding has increased by 61 per cent to \$859 million since the Liberals came to power, compared with the 20 per cent cut to the sector under the previous provincial Conservative government, she noted.

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But Ontario's problems are broader than funding, says child-care expert Martha Friendly of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

"Ontario lacks a coherent system-planning approach to child care," she said.

Provincial governments have introduced numerous initiatives over the years without a sense of how successive pieces relate to each other, what they're achieving, what's working, and what isn't, she noted.

"What are Ontario's goals and objectives for child care? Is it to help working parents? Reduce poverty? Prepare children for school?" she asked. "We just don't know."

Without goals -- and concrete plans to reach them -- the province will never build the high-quality accessible system parents say they need, she added.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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