

Spaces must be affordable ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

A mother wants to upgrade her skills so she can get a job and supplement her husband's low wages. But instead of getting the necessary training, she's at home with her 5-year-old daughter because the family can't afford child care.

It's an all too common story. Indeed, the daycare at Crescent Town Elementary School, where Jannatul attends afternoon kindergarten, is half empty. At more than \$60 a day, regulated child care is unaffordable to the parents, like Rahima Akhter, who need it most.

"The way we fund this system just doesn't work," says Mindy Williams, supervisor at the daycare. She's right.

As the Star's Laurie Monsebraaten reported in the ongoing Child-Care Challenge series on Saturday, our system is falling ever further behind the need.

Toronto oversees more than 56,000 licensed child-care spaces. It is the largest system in the country outside Quebec, where parents pay an enviable \$7 a day for daycare. Despite its size, some Toronto neighbourhoods have no child-care spaces available at all; others have spaces that no one can afford. There are 17,000 kids waiting for the chance to get one of the city's 24,000 child-care subsidies.

This is a system in crisis. So it is welcome that Mayor Rob Ford has agreed to appoint a task force to report to city council in July on how to "expand access to affordable, quality child care."

The last time Toronto comprehensively addressed the problem was in 1997 when an expert panel recommended that "quality, regulated child care should be available to all parents who need it."

We've never even come close to that. And yet the research on the social and economic benefits of achieving that goal keeps on growing.

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Taking a fresh look at how the city can best deliver affordable child care is worthwhile. There may be improvements Toronto can make. But ultimately, the property tax base will never stretch to cover the expansion in affordable service that is so desperately needed. Queen's Park and Ottawa must come to the table for that.

So far, neither is leaping at the opportunity.

The city says Ontario has not increased its portion of child-care subsidies since 1995. Do provincial officials really think that costs have not risen in 15 years? Toronto has managed to keep its spaces largely by raiding reserve funds but that budget dance ends next year.

If that weren't enough, Ontario's new full-day kindergarten program is creating fresh financial havoc in daycare centres.

In Ottawa, Prime Minister Stephen Harper is happily handing out \$2.6 billion a year to parents with children under 6, calling it a universal child-care benefit. Those \$100-a-month cheques have failed to provide any real child-care options for families so the Liberals and NDP have rightly vowed to make a true national child-care plan a federal election issue.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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