

It's time for the Ontario government to deliver on child care ^[1]

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Those of us who regularly Google "child care Ontario" can't help but notice the growing number of local news items that describe the pandemonium threatening child care across the province. This includes not only last week's major report from Toronto Children's Services but news items in local media outlets in Waterloo, Ottawa, Parry Sound, Cambridge, Sudbury, Sault Ste Marie, Cornwall (and probably others that I haven't seen). These calculate coming centre closures and cuts, exploding parent fees, burgeoning space and subsidy waiting lists, centre vacancies in high need neighbourhoods while children go un-served-all the signs of a collapsing child care free-market that doesn't work.

It's time for the Ontario government to step up to prevent this from continuing.

This situation should not be news; harbingers of this crisis have been appearing for some time. A report last spring by the Ontario Municipal Social Service Association (OMSSA) predicted the loss of child care for more than 8,100 northern and rural Ontario children; based on its work across the province, the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) has been calling for emergency funding ^[3] to fill the gaps for more than a year. An Ottawa-based group, I Vote Child Care, noted that "Children and families face the loss of subsidized spaces and even higher parent fees, and communities across the province stand to lose the short and long-term economic benefits that high-quality, affordable child care delivers". And the title of Toronto's Mothers' Task Force on Child Care's report - I should have applied before I was pregnant: How child care in Toronto fails mothers- conveys the prevailing situation for many families.

Last June, I outlined these key pressures in a report for the City of Toronto and identified four specific financial issues that have converged to create a "perfect storm" for Ontario child care:

- Municipalities' "reserve funds" originating with the 2005/06 federal ELCC transfer (the Martin Liberals' program cancelled by the Harper government), are running out.
- Generalized fiscal pressures are impacting various 100% municipal contributions to child care.
- Transfer funds from the province that cover municipalities' child care budgets are not indexed to inflation, so municipalities fall farther and farther behind year after year just to maintain the status quo.
- Finally, the introduction of full day kindergarten has occurred in the absence of a coherent early childhood education and care plan and support by adequate funding across the age span. This is creating historic service failure and funding chaos for child care, although the introduction of full day kindergarten is but the "last straw". Without concerted action, the fallout cannot help but increase next year and the year after, as the kindergarten roll-out proceeds.

These specific financing issues are, however, merely symptomatic of two over-arching, gaping policy gaps, namely, that Ontario does not have an identifiable early childhood education and care policy or plan and that, secondly, public funding for ECEC in Ontario (kindergarten

and child care together) is considerably below accepted international standards - too low to deliver equitable access and high quality.

Not enough money; not enough policy!

The I Vote Child Care group recently noted that "the way child care programs are funded ...short changes the delivery of actual child care programs. For-profit and large chains are growing, and this hurts quality and accessibility. And now, the partial introduction of full-day kindergarten has brought confusion and uncertainty to an already stressed system".

So - what is to be done if Ontario's child care is not going to collapse while full-day kindergarten, which represents but one component of an ECEC system, is being put in place? I'm sure I'm not alone when I say that it's time for the Ontario government to step up and deliver; to move early childhood education and care from the current market to a system-from the present chaos to a planned approach. Moving child care to the Ministry of Education is but a first step; the next steps are harder but necessary.

Here are my recommendations for consideration, slightly adapted from last summer's Funding the future report:

Recommendations to the Ontario government

1. As an urgent priority and first step, shore up existing services by providing emergency funding of \$100 million this year, as per the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care;

2. As an urgent priority and first step, establish a process for annual indexation of provincial transfers to municipalities in order to stabilize municipal capacity, to manage and sustain child care services;

Without these urgent initiatives, the viability in the immediate and short term (well as the longer term) of child care services will be severely undermined across Ontario.

3. In the short and medium term, review and transform child care funding to ensure the viability and sustainability of needed child care services, recognizing that families and children across Ontario need a full range of services for children 0-12 years.

Based on what we know about best practices, Ontario's child care funding should encompass:

- a long term spending goal of at least 1% of GDP on an ECEC system that includes kindergarten and child care for children aged 0-5 years, a benchmark adopted by international bodies such as UNICEF and the OECD;
- a plan for funding service expansion with a long-term goal of universal ECEC provision;
- a new base funding model;
- capital funding to support expansion and quality environments;
- recognition and support for pay equity for early childhood educators;
- funds to support ongoing quality enhancement;
- data, research and evaluation.

4. In the short term, as the senior level of government with constitutional responsibility for education and social services, Ontario should develop a full, comprehensive policy framework to support an evidence-based Ontario-wide public management approach to an integrated early childhood education and care system for children aged 0-12 encompassing child care, kindergarten and parent support.

The provincial approach should follow best practices and use the best available evidence from research and policy analysis. This would include:

- a predictable multi-year approach to planning and funding, clear goals and objectives, roles and responsibilities;
- identified targets and timetables;
- sustained financial commitments;
- collaboration with stakeholders including municipalities and the ECEC community; transparency and public accountability measures;
- quality goals, improvement and assurance;
- data collection, analysis and ongoing evaluation to determine and improve policy and programs.

5. In the immediate term, Ontario should adopt a moratorium on new for-profit child care development until a fuller and comprehensive policy approach to ECEC is in place.

In the near term, Ontario should adopt public policy based on publicly-delivered and not-for-profit ECEC programs.

As the Funding the Future report notes, the report written for the Ontario government by Charles Pascal observed that "it would be ineffective and costly to layer the new [full day kindergarten] program on top of a web of unsolved problems".

That observation was made in 2009 but the "unsolved web of problems" has not been addressed in 2011. It's time to deliver- a full transformation of the early childhood education and care situation available to Ontario families and children.

Tags:

funding ^[4]

kindergarten ^[5]

spaces ^[6]

full-day early learning ^[7]

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