

Solutions: How the Ontario government can rescue and ensure the viability and quality of the province's child care system ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Full paper in pdf ^[2]

QELN is concerned that the child care system is facing an impending crisis that will directly impact children, families and the community agencies that serve them. Significant and immediate action is necessary. Local solutions can only take us so far; what is needed now is a province wide approach to ensure the burden is not borne by families and children or service providers.

The paper puts forward immediate, short, mid-term and long term actions. These are based on several critical assumptions including:

- full day kindergarten is a positive initiative;
- the transformation and viability of the child care system will require significant additional investments and a new base funding model; and
- child care should be delivered through non-profit and public agencies.

Immediate actions:

- emergency funding this year to shore up existing non-profit and public child care services.
- annual indexation of provincial transfers to municipalities to stabilize municipal capacity to manage and sustain licensed child care services.
- beginning a process to develop a long-term, modernized, coherent, publicly managed, publicly-funded early childhood education and care (ECEC) system in Ontario. This includes a shift to base funding and improving wages for ECEC staff.
- a moratorium on new for-profit child care licenses until a comprehensive policy approach to public and non-profit ECEC is in place.

Summary

This purpose of this paper is to open a dialogue with the provincial government and to offer comprehensive solutions for stabilizing and transforming the ECEC (child care) system.

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Child care in Ontario is based on policy and funding models dating back to the middle of the last century. As a result, ECEC policy and service provision in Ontario has fallen far behind the needs of a 21st century population, creating a crisis in child care in the immediate term and diminished capacity to meet family, community and societal needs in the longer term.

In 2010, full-day kindergarten was introduced by the Ontario government as a progressive step towards meeting 21st century challenges in education and child development. While the value of full day kindergarten is well accepted, successful implementation requires equal attention to its impact on an already shaky child care sector. To date, it has been layered on top of what Ontario's Special Advisor on Early Learning has called an "unsolved web of problems" (Pascal, 2009).

Child care in Ontario is now entering a period of unparalleled financial pressures. The following developments confirm that Ontario Child Care is at a critical point, requiring immediate and comprehensive government action:

- To date, licensed quality child care has only been accessible to a minority of children; child care centres are now closing and even fewer children will be able to benefit. Increasing number of parents in many communities will have little or no high quality child care options from which to "choose".
- Income-eligible families have typically endured long waits for fee subsidies. These subsidy waiting lists have now become so lengthy that low income families have limited prospects for ever securing a subsidy. Some municipalities that did not previously have subsidy waiting lists now report them. This situation will worsen once per diem fees increase (see below).
- Licensed child care fees are already unaffordable for modest and middle income families (as child care is primarily supported by parent fees). Infant, toddler and preschool-age fees are anticipated to increase by as much as 10 - 30% as full-day kindergarten is phased in and the "cheaper" four- and five-year olds move out of fullday child care.
- Municipalities face growing shortfalls; subsidy per-diems are being cut back. Their current subsidy funding will purchase fewer spaces once the per-space costs increase.

- Early Childhood Educator (ECE) wages and working conditions vary greatly across the sector. Insufficient wage enhancement funding is irregularly available contributing to discrepancies among agencies in the same community. This issue takes on critical importance now that ECEs are also being recruited in large numbers by school boards for FDK. Child care's capacity to recruit and retain qualified staff will require competitive wages, benefits and working conditions.
- In 1998, the for-profit sector had fallen to 17% of total spaces. Since 2004 it has increased steadily and by 2010 comprised 25% of total spaces. At the same time, a new well-financed, publicly-traded child care corporation has entered the Ontario scene to buy out struggling centre

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: funding ^[4]

accessibility ^[5]

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