

Toronto Mayor's Task Force on Child Care: Report offers little relief ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

After eight months of study, the report from Toronto Mayor Rob Ford's Task Force on Child Care offers few new suggestions to shore up the city's cash-strapped system, advocates say.

"Basically, it just reinforces what we have known for years: The provincial and federal government need to step up to the plate," said Jane Mercer of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care in response to the "thin" 11-page report released Thursday.

"We don't need any more task forces. We don't need any more visioning. We need a well-funded early learning and child care system that meets the needs of families in 2012 in Toronto and across Ontario," she said.

In addition to calling for more provincial and federal funding, the report's seven recommendations include an updated funding formula, tax incentives to help build new child care centres and a call for daycares to explore block purchasing to cut costs.

More than 21,000 Toronto children are on the city's daycare subsidy waiting list. Meantime, the city's 57,000-space licensed system serves just 20 per cent of Toronto children under age 10 and subsidies are available for just 28 per cent of those in low-income families, the report notes.

Area parents Clayton and Salaheh Jackson say the report offers little solace to parents waiting for spaces or subsidies.

When the couple's 5-year-old daughter Arianna was a baby, they waited just a few months for a subsidy.

But it took almost a year to secure a subsidy for their 11-month-old baby Surina.

"I know other parents in this community who are still waiting for subsidies and it is very stressful," said Clayton, who works as an early childhood educator at Red Apple. "I hope governments listen to the report because we definitely need more child care."

Toronto's chronically underfunded child care operators, now scrambling to cope with the loss of 4- and 5-year-olds to all-day kindergarten, saw little immediate relief in the report.

"Sometimes we have the space, but we can't fill it because parents in our community can't get a subsidy and they can't afford the full fee," said Neena Locke, director of Red Apple Day Care in Flemingdon Park.

Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti, hand-picked by Ford to chair the task force last fall, created a stir earlier this week when he put forward a personal recommendation- which was not supported by the broader group - that the city get out of the child care business and hand over control to the province.

Councillor Janet Davis said that wouldn't solve anything.

"Simply side loading an underfunded service over to the school boards is not solving the financing problem with respect to child care," she said.

Child care experts were equally baffled by Mammoliti's rogue recommendation.

"This kind of very poor governance process is just more evidence that it's time for the Ontario government to have a real early childhood and education and care policy so child care isn't up for grabs by every Tom, Dick and Giorgio," said Martha Friendly of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

At Queen's Park, Education Minister Laurel Broten was non-committal about Mammoliti's call for the province to take over the city's child care responsibilities.

"Certainly I'm looking forward to receiving the taskforce's report, (and) understanding whether Councillor Mammoliti's position is the will of council," she said.

Broten noted that the province has just allocated \$242 million over the next three years to help daycares increase service for children from birth to age 3.8 as older children move to all-day kindergarten.

She has also released a discussion paper to help guide that transformation.

"We see that we have a role to play, but we do rely significantly on our municipal partners. . . to deliver childcare and I look to have an understanding of whether Councillor Mammoliti's position is consistent across the council," she said.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario [2]

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