

Ontario Liberals vow to index child care benefit and boost daycare wages ^[1]

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie & Brennan, Richard

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EXCERPTS

In another budget promise aimed at avoiding a spring election, Ontario's minority Liberal government is pledging more money to help poor children and chronically underpaid daycare workers.

In the May 1 budget, the Liberals are proposing to index the Ontario Child Benefit and spend \$269 million over two years to raise the wages of daycare workers in licensed settings by \$2 an hour, Education Minister Liz Sandals said Tuesday.

"By boosting the Ontario Child Benefit and increasing wages in the licensed child care sector, our government is working to support families and children all across the province," Sandals told reporters at a downtown Toronto daycare centre.

"This is money that is new to my budget. It will only be in my budget if the 2014 budget is passed," she warned.

When asked if she thinks the budget will pass, Sandals said she is "very optimistic."

The proposed wage hike is aimed at closing the pay gap between early childhood educators working in licensed daycare centres and homes whose median hourly wage is about \$16.30 and those employed in full-day kindergarten classrooms who make between \$20 and \$26 an hour. It is the first significant wage increase since 2007, when the province spent about \$25 million to give the lowest-paid daycare workers a 3-per-cent raise.

About 42,000 program staff working in licensed daycare in Ontario, including about 17,000 early childhood educators, would be eligible for this latest increase, Sandals said. Under the plan, they would see their hourly wages jump by \$1 in January 2015 and by another \$1 in 2016, she said.

The Ontario Child Benefit supports 1 million children in about 500,000 low- to moderate-income families. Since 2008, it has helped lift almost 60,000 children out of poverty and has been a major plank of the province's five-year poverty reduction strategy launched that year.

As first announced in the 2012 budget, the benefit is scheduled to rise by \$100 to \$1,310 this July. If this spring's budget passes, the benefit will be adjusted for inflation in July 2015 and every July after that, Sandals said. This year's increase and next year's indexation would cost the government about \$160 million.

"This will allow low- to moderate-income families to manage the rising cost of living in a predictable way," she said.

Ontario Campaign 2000, a coalition fighting to end child poverty, has been calling on the government to index the benefit and then increase it by another \$500 by 2018.

Child care advocates said a wage increase is "long overdue."

"This announcement in itself, doesn't make child care more affordable or more available," said Andrea Calver of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. "But it definitely strengthens the system and it says to those hard-working staff (their) work is valued."

Under pay equity, which the government says is in addition to the proposed wage hike, child care staff should be making between \$24 and \$30 an hour, Calver added.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Ontario, which represents about 10,000 unionized child care workers in the province, supports the wage increase, but said at least \$300 million more is needed this year to keep programs from closing due to longtime underfunding.

Martha Friendly of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit noted that Ontario is the only province in Canada that has seen child care worker wages drop since 1998. A larger policy review is needed to stabilize the system, she said.

Tory MPP Monte McNaughton (London-Kent-Middlesex) said Tuesday's announcement is "all about trying to buy the next election" and win support of the NDP for the upcoming budget.

NDP MPP Monique Taylor (Hamilton Mountain) said her party welcomed the promise to tie future child benefit increases to inflation, but would be waiting to see if the government "follows through" in the budget fine-print.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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