

Ontario needs a good child care strategy ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

In a provincial election that is understandably focused on jobs and the economy, NDP Leader Andrea Horwath deserves credit for shining a spotlight on a vital service that helps society thrive: a safe and sustainable child care system.

Such a system doesn't exist in Ontario now. Yes, there are licensed day care centres, but many parents face long waiting lists, high fees and the risk that their centre will close due to various reasons - including chronic government underfunding of an estimated \$300 million a year.

Despite Premier Kathleen Wynne's \$269-million budget proposal for a \$2-an-hour boost to day-care workers' wages, and Horwath's promise to spend \$100 million on the centres, no leader is talking about a long-term strategy for survival for the struggling \$900-million system.

It's unfortunate, because a healthy day-care system can help the economy thrive. Think about it: parents assured of a safe, affordable place for their child can actually go to a job that (hopefully) gives them enough disposable income to contribute to the economy.

Additional day-care spaces would offer opportunities that are the talk of the campaign and, perhaps most important as our economy relies on an educated workforce, children benefit from early education at a time when their brains are still wired for learning.

Indeed, as the Star's Laurie Monsebraaten has reported, TD Economics estimates that every dollar invested in early learning and child care returns between 1.5 and 3 dollars to the economy. After its 2012 report was published, TD Bank Chief Economist Craig Alexander said, "It's very much an economic topic. If you are concerned with skills development, productivity and innovation, you should really care about this subject."

Instead, child care centres are closing, although no one knows how many because such figures, if collected by the provincial government, aren't widely available, advocates say. Many centres have long waiting lists or the monthly cost per child is so high that only a few can afford it.

There's no real secret about the changes that are needed. Groups like the respected Childcare Resource and Research Unit have long pushed for an overall strategy and are seeking a commitment for change from Ontario's political leaders. Nothing substantial will be achieved without a detailed plan forward.

To that end, their demands are specific: an early childhood education policy framework that includes goals for expansion; education principles and timetables for implementation; funding improvements; wage increases; and a time-out on the Liberal government's planned regulatory changes that included larger groups of children with fewer staff.

While Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak has refused to spend more money on day care, there has been some jostling between Wynne and Horwath.

The NDP leader is taking credit for earlier improvements in the Liberals' 2012 budget and boasting of her one-time promise of \$100 million for day-care centres. But Wynne says she is the only leader to offer a child-care "modernization" plan and a \$2 wage boost to give workers roughly \$18 an hour. If Wynne is re-elected, she should reconsider her previous (ill-advised) changes that would have increased the number of very young children in day-care groups, with fewer workers. That's just bad policy.

There's no better time than an election campaign to debate issues that affect Ontario's working families. Politicians should take note: there's a new group of parents - potential voters - seeking daycare every few years.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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