

Small changes don't add up to affordable child care^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Last year, Star readers identified access to affordable child care as one of their top 10 big ideas. This week, we check in on what, if any, progress has been made.

With the clock ticking down on her maternity leave and a new job lined up for January, Linda Nakanishi was still weighing her child-care options.

"The closer I'm getting to going back to work, it weighs more heavily on my mind," she said.

Since she got pregnant with Amiko, it seemed every conversation revolved around child care, seeing if there's "some magic solution that works."

"And there really isn't," said the 37-year-old. "Every mother I spoke to said, 'Well, it's expensive. But what other options do we have?'"

She and her partner had secured a private daycare spot, but faced with paying \$1,600 a month and both mother and daughter starting new routines at the same time, they looked to alternatives.

They had thought about leaving Toronto, which has the country's most expensive daycare. But the long commute, cutting into family time, wasn't worth the trade-off.

Citing a long waitlist, the daycare rejected a request to defer the spot by two months while Nakanishi settled into her new job.

So dad David Matton, who works from home, and Linda's mother will provide care until Amiko turns 18 months, when fees drop.

"He's doubling up, so it's going to be a little more difficult for him. But we decided that the amount of money that it costs for day care ... it didn't make sense," she said. Instead the family will "just kind of sacrifice a bit."

Since Star readers voted for affordable child care as a top priority, not much has changed for parents like Nakanishi and Matton. Though child care was not a major campaign plank for John Tory, the city has made some strides in 2015.

"We've been inching forward to address the incredible demand for affordable child care in our city," Councillor Janet Davis told the Star. "We can't do it alone, though."

Over the summer, council adopted a service and funding strategy for child care, including a motion put forth by Davis to create 310 new city-run spots by 2020. Davis calls the additional spaces "very modest growth."

The number of licensed child care spaces in the city across all providers rose by about 3,000 from May 2014 to June 2015. Available subsidies have slightly increased, but only 28.7 per cent of eligible families receive the help, leaving 17,838 children waiting.

The province recently announced plans to renovate schools, resulting in 1,235 more licensed child-care spaces. That follows a promise of 4,000 new spaces in the spring budget.

But spaces and subsidies coming in dribs and drabs don't address the bigger picture, say child-care advocates.

"One announcement is not going to grow our child-care system at the rate it needs to grow," said Jane Mercer, the executive co-ordinator for the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care.

She credits increased provincial funding and the expansion of full-day kindergarten programs for slightly easing the crunch, but real change can only come with a fully funded system, she said.

"We already have the community of Toronto at the table with their sleeves rolled up, delivering the care," Mercer said. "What we're missing is the partnership of senior levels of government."

Martha Friendly, founder and executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, agrees significant change won't come until

all levels of government pitch in.

“Even if you have good planning at the local level ... it’s hard to make a dent in the absence of public policy and public funding,” she said.

Though the Harper government offered no fundamental change, the newly elected Liberals could turn the tables, she said. The party has pledged to create a “National Early Learning and Child Care Framework.” Though short on details, it proposes “affordable, high-quality, flexible, and fully inclusive child care.”

Friendly is hopeful change at the top would trickle down, but she’s not expecting a flood of reform any time soon.

“Child care is not just a commodity, it’s a social policy issue. And that’s hard to move it ahead. But it can be done.”

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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