

# Ontario squandering its chance to be a leader on child care <sup>[1]</sup>

Posted on 29 Feb 2016

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The 2016 Ontario budget wasted a golden opportunity for leadership on developing the national early learning and child care plan that Ontario families need. Chapter 4 of the Ontario budget is dedicated to detailing Ontario's priorities for collaborative action with the federal government but is silent on the National Early Learning and Child Care Framework promised by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

In the past, Kathleen Wynne's government has claimed to be eager to work with any willing federal partner on a national child care plan. In a report card on actions and commitments in the last provincial election campaign, the Liberals unequivocally stated they would "take leadership with provinces/territories/federal leaders to put a national child care program back on the political agenda". The Ontario Liberals even voted with the NDP in NDP Leader Andrea Horwath's Opposition Day motion last year saying that "this province should partner with the federal government to ensure that every parent in Ontario has access to child care at a cost of no more than \$15 a day per child."

So imagine the crushing disappointment in the child care community that early learning and child care gets no mention in a 15-page chapter listing the Ontario government's priorities for intergovernmental collaboration. Some of the pages are actually half blank, so it would have cost the Ontario government nothing more than ink to recommit to a National Early Learning and Child Care Framework. Families that believed Ontario would be eager to work on a national child care plan will be bitterly disappointed by this reversal.

So what was in the Ontario budget for child care? As the Toronto Star pointed out in an editorial on February 29 —nothing. Budget 2016 was heavy on re-announcements of past years' work, pointing to a government seemingly content to rest on the laurels of the introduction of full-day kindergarten (FDK) in 2010, rather than seeing FDK as it was always intended in Early Learning Advisor Charles Pascal's vision – just the first step in moving to a seamless system of early learning and care. Re-announcements of past capital and wage investments also mask the absence of new money.

## A growing storm: Mounting opposition to Ontario's child care regulations

While it was short on new money, the budget document was long on descriptions of the government's child care "modernization" agenda – an agenda that is proving increasingly problematic. While some initiatives, including the introduction of a new Child Care and Early Years Act, were promising steps forward, current recycled regulatory proposals are very concerning.

Budget 2016 claims that the government is committed to improving child care's regulatory framework and to "setting higher standards for health and safety of children." But the Ministry of Education's most recent **regulatory posting** <sup>[3]</sup> (posted February 1) is meeting mounting opposition from the child care sector for threatening both quality and access.

The regulation posting proposes redefining age groups resulting in younger children being placed in larger groups, more needless transitions for our youngest children, and more burnout for the child care workforce – all of which threaten the quality of child care programs for our youngest children. Some municipalities and operators are also warning about the impact on access, calculating that the changes could result in fewer centre-based spaces for families, especially the loss of infant programs for children under 1 year of age. This is a concern for the many families (particularly those who are lower income) unable to take a full-year of maternity and parental leave.

Rather than setting higher standards, these regulation proposals actually threaten quality. It's the third time the government has tried to

force these proposals to increase ratios and group sizes by changing age groupings on the child care sector.

The provincial government is also proposing to change the regulation that specifies a caseload of 25 homes per home child care agency home visitor to an unlimited caseload. This is especially concerning as home visitors not only are the front-line supports to regulated child care in providers' own homes but carry responsibility for ascertaining that provincial home child care regulations are met.

The child care community will continue to resist regulation changes that water down the quality of care for Ontario's youngest children.

### **Crisis ignored: Sky high parent fees**

This year's budget also sees no new money for funding provided through the funding formula. The budget claims that last year's modest investment helped "avoid sudden and rapid fluctuations to fees", but for the second year in a row, Ontario has topped the list of highest and least affordable parent fees in Canada.

A recent report on child care fees<sup>[4]</sup> across Canada found that the seven most expensive cities for child care are all here in Ontario: Toronto, Markham, Ottawa, Vaughan, Mississauga, Brampton, and London. Compare the \$987 per month Ottawa parents pay for a preschool space with the average fee of \$174 per month across the river in Gatineau, Quebec. Child care fees are higher than university tuition, and a crushing burden for many families.

### **Turning things around**

Ontario can still get serious about early learning and child care, but it will take more than re-announcements. The Wynne government must make a real commitment to a principles-based national framework, one grounded in the concepts of universality, high quality and comprehensiveness—one that treats child care as a public good rather than a commodity.

In response to the Trudeau government's promise of a National Framework, child care advocates across Canada have developed a Shared Framework<sup>[5]</sup> to help facilitate a collaborative intergovernmental and community process to serve as a basis for a program that will grow, over time, to meet the needs of families and children in all regions. If the Ontario government was truly eager to work with a willing federal partner to ensure every Ontario parent has access to affordable child care, then the child care community's Shared Framework would be a perfect place to start.

Meanwhile, the province's youngest children grow another year older waiting for the Ontario government to honour its child care promise.

#### **Tags:**

legislation and regulation<sup>[6]</sup>

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